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Falling Moon

This is the 2nd book in the Rising Sun series. I highly recommend you read the first book before this one.

~

Moonkit is no ordinary kit.

Her star-white pelt matches just one of her known kin, her father's rogue-traitor sister, Ivyfrost, but her eyes gleam yellow, like an ancestor she didn't know she had.

Her life may seem relatively normal at a first glance.

However, when past mistakes haunt and the threat of a battle rises again, she is forced to investigate, and her life is turned upside down very quickly.

Join Moonkit as she journeys through unknown territory, endures and solves huge problems, meets strange cats in high places, and comes face to face with a threat that she didn't even know existed.

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER: Bumblestar - Pale ginger tom with amber eyes.

DEPUTY: Shrewfoot - Dark grey tom with green eyes.
Apprentice: Goldenpaw

MEDICINE CATS:

Silverleaf - Pretty white she-cat with silver-grey patches along her back.

Whitepool - White she-cat with one grey paw and pale green eyes.

WARRIORS:

Hazelshade - Silver-and-white tabby she-cat with light brown eyes.

Rowanfur - Dark ginger tom with green eyes.
Apprentice: Spottedpaw

Tawnywing - Small light brown she-cat with green eyes.
Apprentice: Lilypaw

Swanfeather - Long-furred white tom with blue eyes.
Apprentice: Ivypaw

Raventail - Sleek black tom with brown eyes. Former loner.

Oakfur - Dark brown tom with grey eyes.

Toadfur - Light brown scarred tom with murky green eyes.

Honeywhisker - White she-cat with golden patches and bright blue eyes. Former loner.

Willowpetal - Pale grey she-cat with dark green eyes.

Sorrelspots - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with dark blue eyes.

Kestreltail - Small brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Ashcloud - Light grey tabby tom with green-amber eyes.

Cherryblossom - Ginger and white she-cat with green eyes.
Apprentice: Owlpaw

Thistleheart - Grey tom with pale blue eyes.

Sunflame - Large pale golden tabby tom with striking amber eyes.

Aspenfall - Pale silver tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Wolfwhisker - Grey tom with icy blue eyes.
Apprentice: Thistlepaw

APPRENTICES

Goldenpaw - Pale golden tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Spottedpaw - White she-cat with golden spots along her back and pale blue eyes.

Lilypaw - Pale grey and white she-cat with green eyes.

Ivypaw - White she-cat with brown paws and amber eyes.

Owlpaw - Pale brown tom with amber eyes.

Thistlepaw - Spiky-furred pale grey tom with grey eyes.

QUEENS

Pebblesplash - Pale grey she-cat with darker socks and green eyes. (Expecting Oakfur's kits)

Amberblaze - Sleek black she-cat with a dark ginger chest and blue eyes. (Mother to Sunflame's kits: Palekit, a pale honey-golden she-kit with blue-grey eyes, and Moonkit, a white she-kit with pale yellow eyes.)

ELDERS

Gingerheart - Frail light ginger she-cat with one light brown paw and amber eyes.

Thrushwhisker - Wiry brown tom with dark green eyes.

Redfeather - Long-furred dark ginger she-cat with pale brown eyes.

WINDCLAN

LEADER: Driftstar - Grey and white tom.

DEPUTY: Cloudsong - Silver tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes.
Apprentice: Poppypaw

MEDICINE CATS: Oatwhisker - Pale brown tom with a white chest and hazel eyes.

Beechbark - Cream tom with one brown paw and green eyes.

WARRIORS

Thicketfur - Large pale brown tom with dark green eyes.

Blacktail - Black tom with a long tail.

Lioncloud - Pale ginger tom with green eyes.

Primrosepelt - Golden she-cat with amber eyes.

Streamripple - Silver tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.
Apprentice: Lightpaw

Mousetail - Small pale grey tom with pale green eyes and a short tail.

Gorselight - Small fluffy ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes.

APPRENTICES

Lightpaw - White she-cat with green eyes.

Poppypaw- Pale ginger she-cat with green eyes.

QUEENS

Duskfoot - Pale brown she-cat with darker flecks. (Expecting Lioncloud's kits)

ELDERS

Rockeye - Giant grey tom with brown eyes. Blind in left eye.

Voletooth - Light brown tom with green eyes.

Poppynose - Light brown she-cat.

RIVERCLAN

LEADER: Eveningstar - Pale grey she-cat with faint flecks, a dark face, paws and tail and dark blue eyes.

DEPUTY: Quailfeather - Dark brown tom with lighter splotches.

MEDICINE CAT: Lostleg - Ginger tom with one leg missing.
Apprentice: Ashenpaw

WARRIORS

Ashwing - Dark grey she-cat with white flecks.
Apprentice: Leafpaw

Fogbreeze - Pale grey and white tom.

Willowleaf - Light brown she-cat with dark green eyes.

Ferndapple - Dappled grey she-cat with dark green eyes.

Barkfoot - Dark brown broad-faced tabby tom with amber eyes.

Wavetail - Dark grey tabby tom with blue eyes.

Webfrost - Dark brown tabby tom with blue eyes.

Smokesong - Dark grey she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Russetleaf - Dark ginger she-cat with pale blue eyes.

APPRENTICES

Leafpaw - Pale ginger she-cat.

Ashenpaw - Pale grey she-cat with icy blue eyes.

QUEENS

Iceleap - White she-cat with a long, bushy tail. (Mother to Tigerkit and Sweetkit)

Shadeclaw - Dark grey she-cat with light amber eyes. (Expecting Barkfoot's kits)

ELDERS

Snakenose - Dark grey tabby tom with russet patches and green eyes.

Dogpelt - Dark brown tom with a long scar across one eye.

Foxface - Dark ginger and white tom with a large muzzle.

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER: Flashstar - White tom with amber eyes.

DEPUTY: Ratstone - Large black tom.

MEDICINE CATS:

Goosewhisker - White tom with brown eyes.

Tansyfrost - Golden she-cat with bright green eyes.

WARRIORS

Paleleg - Long-legged pale grey tom.

Raintail - Grey tabby tom with a white tail-tip.
Apprentice: Eaglepaw

Amberfoot - Ginger she-cat with white paws.

Featherleg - Soft-furred, long-legged, dark grey she-cat with brown eyes.

Puddlepelt - Blue-grey tom with dark grey paws.
Apprentice: Echopaw

Lizardfur - Short-furred brown she-cat with green eyes. Former rogue.

Blizzardnose - Grey tom with white flecks and amber eyes.

Lilytail - White she-cat with dark green eyes.
Apprentice: Ripplepaw

APPRENTICES

Eaglepaw - White tom with a brown tail.

Echopaw - Pale grey she-cat with white paws and black ear-tips and amber eyes.

Ripplepaw - Dark grey tom with clear blue eyes.

QUEENS

Splashnose - pale grey she-cat with dark brown eyes.

ELDERS

Heatherfur - Pale grey she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Dustmuzzle - Young pale brown tom with eyes slashed out.

CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

Azura - Tortoiseshell she-cat with bright blue eyes.

Lola - White she-cat with a grey patch over one eye. A kittypet.

Prologue

A shady clearing in the middle of the dense forest of oak, birch and sycamore was the only thing that the rebellious clouds allowed the moon that they were diligently shielding to gaze upon.

Whether this was the strange cats who lived in this prosperous territory's mysterious abilities or simply a coincidence that caused the moon to shine on just that clearing, the black cat perched on the branches of a large sycamore- the largest in the forest, in fact- didn't know, but it did know one thing:

The territory that the starry ancestors watched over would soon belong to a much, much darker force, and there was nothing they could do except sit back and watch.

As she gazed upon the clearing, voices began to appear, and though slightly audible, they were greatly muffled by the thick layers of leaves and trees.

After a while, however, a blue-grey she-cat emerged, her fur silver in the pale light.

Flanked by a pretty silver-grey she-cat with mesmerising blue eyes and a fiery ginger tom, she sat in the clearing, as if waiting for something.

For a while, the black she-cat perched in the trees watched as the three cats sat in an arc in silence, but she grew mildly bored after a while. *Are they actually coming tonight, or did I get the wrong night?*

After deciding that the latter was the correct answer, the she-cat bunched up her haunches, preparing to leap down from the spot she'd spent weeks trying to find just so she could witness this precise moment.

However, a soft scuffling noise stopped the green-eyed she-cat from departing back to her own desolate territory.

She turned her head just in time to see three other cats join the first three in the clearing: a huge light tabby tom with a broken jaw, a black and white tom with an unusually long tail and a white tom with gigantic black paws.

Just a few more cats, the black she-cat thought with a sudden thrill of excitement. If she overheard the Prophecy, finally she would gain the means to have control over the Clans.

The cat's breath sped up, her heart beating erratically. Finally, she would witness what she'd come to hear.

"Will those medicine cats hurry up? We all know Yellowfang likes to take her time *preparing*, but WindClan is never late."

The black and white tom's bored meow echoed around the forest, his long tail flicking impatiently.

"Preparation is good, Tallstar," murmured one of the cats; the bright ginger tom who sat next to the blue she-cat had risen to his paws, watching Tallstar with hooded eyes. "The medicine cats obviously foresaw that this meeting would be important- and take a while- so they prepared themselves."

Then the flame-coloured tom turned to the rest of the Clan cats.

"However, we have a crisis on our paws."

A murmur of shock rippled through the cats. The blue she-cat was the only one to stay still, grim-faced and quiet.

"A medicine cat from each Clan has foreseen a dark omen for all of the Clans, inescapable and treacherous."

"It is a darkness that only two Clans share," grumbled the tom with the broken jaw. "Why must we all be here?"

The fire-pelted tom spoke again, this time with an edge to his voice. "The Clans have only survived this long because of the unity that they have preserved. If there is a threat, they must stand together, or all four Clans will be destroyed."

At this, three more cats emerged from the shadows- a grey she-cat with a matted pelt and yellow eyes like a monsters', a very pale grey tabby she-cat and a dark brown tom with a short tail.

"Ah, good. Now we can finally get down to business." The blue-grey she-cat spoke with the authority of a seasoned leader, her head held high. Her fur shone silver, almost as silver as the fur around her muzzle, in the bright moonlight.

The grey she-cat with matted fur answered her with a huff. "I thought it was only going to be ThunderClan here. I can't stand the stench of RiverClan, let alone WindClan's rabbit-dung reek. Don't get me started on-"

"We didn't come here on light terms, Yellowfang," the tom with the crooked jaw grunted, eyes trained on the ground. He nodded to the fiery tom. "Firestar did plenty to get us here."

Firestar's ears flattened. "I offered to hunt for them for a moon," he muttered.

A ripple of amusement spread through the three medicine cats. "Oh, Firestar... You're too kind for your own good. I'm sure that if it weren't for your Clan, you would've given up half the forest by now to *WindClan*," retorted Yellowfang, her usually grumpy scowl lifted into something a little more pleasant.

With a grunt of agreement, Firestar rose to his paws, then ran his gaze around the gathering of cats. "Alright. Bluestar, Cinderstar, Crookedstar, Tallstar, Blackstar, Yellowfang, Willowshine, Barkface and- where's Runningnose?"

Yellowfang let out a faint growl-like purr. "The mouse-brain wanted to look for another cure for his cold." That purr-growl emitted from her again. "It's still running now, even in StarClan."

Blackstar also let out a purr at this, closing his eyes. "That takes me back to when he was your apprentice. Always trying to find cures for everything except himself. Glad to see he's finally gotten some sense into him, trying to cure himself at last. So he's still as careless in death as he was in life?"

Yellowfang's hackles raised. "He wasn't careless! I trained him better than that."

Bluestar interrupted. "Yes, well, thank you for coming to this meeting."

She then turned to the medicine cats. "Shall we discuss this in a group, or in our clans? I know this effects all of us, but it should be up to each leader or medicine cat to tell their clan."

Blackstar spoke up. "I think we should discuss it in Clans. Remember, we all need to decide who we visit by ourselves."

However, Firestar objected, with Cinderstar nodding alongside him. "But we should choose together. That way we can make sure that we've all got the right cats. This is a matter that concerns everyone, after all."

After a quick murmur spread around the cats, they all nodded unanimously, though Yellowfang muttered, "You still have bees in your brain, Firestar. Good to see nothing's changed in the past few seconds."

The fiery tom chose to ignore the teasing jibe, instead speaking louder. "Alright. Well discuss it with our Clans. Do we all know the prophecy?"

The black cat paused. *They already knew? How could I be so foolish?* She mentally scolded herself. They didn't come here to share it, they came here to discuss messages? What a waste of time!

She prepared to leap down, but paused. *They might have some valuable information for me still*, she contemplated, *so maybe I should stay for a few more minutes.*

All but Cinderstar nodded to Bluestar's question, but Firestar leant over to murmur something into her ear, and her face quickly turned from confusion to horror.

Bluestar, who had noticeably taken charge of the meeting, meowed, "Leaders, your thoughts? Starting with RiverClan."

Crookedstar rose, though didn't speak for a while, thinking deeply.

Then, he mewed, "I know who I'll send it to."

A bright flash almost blinded the cats.

After the light cleared, a pale grey she-cat had appeared, lying in the dust, peering around her with unmasked bewilderment registered in her piercing blue eyes.

"Where am I? who are you?" She mewed hesitantly.

Crookedstar stepped forward, Willowshine by his side. "I am Crookedstar, and this is Willowshine. Do not be afraid, Ashenpaw, just come, walk with me. I bring you some news for your Clan."

The three RiverClan cats disappeared, murmuring quietly between one another.

"Right. I'm next." Blackstar spoke up, and a bright light flashed again, though this time, a white tom appeared, amber-brown eyes staring at the cats, confused.

After a while, he raised himself onto his paws. "Blackstar? Is that you?" He mewed to Blackstar, who dipped his head, beckoning for the cat to follow.

"Hm..." The meow came from Tallstar, who closed his eyes for a moment, thinking.

The bright flash came again, a pale brown tom with a white chest standing there. "Ah, Tallstar, Barkface. It's good to see you again." The tom spoke with a voice cracked with age.

"Come, Oatwhisker. There is no time to lose. I have a prophecy for you."

Tallstar and Barkface both disappeared into the forest, leading the medicine cat behind them.

Now only Bluestar, Firestar, Cinderstar and Yellowfang sat in the clearing, all looking at one another expectantly.

"Well, I haven't got any ideas, so stop looking at me," snapped Yellowfang, turning her head away.

Bluestar stood up. "Why don't we just send it to Silverleaf? She's a good medicine cat- she'll interpret it fine."

"She's under too much pressure. How about Whitepool?" Firestar suggested.

Cinderstar's eyes narrowed. "You're all putting off the fact that the cat we need to speak to is too young."

Both leaders glanced at each other, then sighed in unison. "I know," meowed Firestar, while Bluestar just shrugged.

Yellowfang rose to her paws, confronting Cinderstar. "You still think we should send the prophecy to a *kit*? And *his* kit at that?"

Bluestar nodded. "She does have a point, Cinderstar."

The silver she-cat wouldn't hear of it. "She's my kin. Did I interpret any of your warnings wrong?"

Firestar mewed, "She does have a point, Bluestar." He added a friendly purr towards Bluestar, who scowled at him. "Besides, we don't really need her to interpret anything. Her hearing this will set her on her path."

Yellowfang sighed. "I didn't come here to gossip like an elder. Have we all made our decision?"

With one last glance to each other, they all nodded.

After another white flash, a tiny white she-kit appeared. As she took in the starlit clearing, then finally the cats who seemed to glow before her, she swallowed, her small legs shaking with fear. "Wh-who are you?" She stammered, her yellow gaze fixed on all the cats.

The cat in the trees paused. "She looks just like Screech," she murmured softly. Her eyes closed, then opened as the kit got to her paws. "She'll be perfect."

But what was her name?

"Do not be afraid. We are StarClan."

The kit's eyes widened, and she stopped shaking.

"Don't fret, Moonkit, for we only bring news. You will be safe here."

Moonkit... A fitting name. The cat in the trees couldn't help but smile her unique, cruel smile, green-yellow eyes gleaming in the moonlight.

After a few murmured words from Firestar, Cinderstar led the cat away. The fiery tom followed close behind.

Just Bluestar sat in the clearing, her gaze on the trees where Firestar's tail had just disappeared to.

The cat saw this as her chance. *Bluestar is one of the most powerful cats in StarClan. If I could kill her...* She began leaping from tree to tree, her eyes narrowed in focus.

However, when she was in a small birch tree, one circling the clearing, she halted. Was Bluestar *laughing*?

"Well-played, Nightshade." Came the meow. Bluestar turned around, a smirk plastered on her face.

"Hello, Bluestar." Nightshade mewed, blinking innocently. "Lovely weather you're having here in StarClan."

The blue she-cat sighed. "Just get out of here. I know you've been here the whole time, and so does everyone else. Why else do you think they went elsewhere to talk?"

Their skills are as sharp as ever, even in StarClan, Nightshade reluctantly admitted to herself, then sighed. "Oh, Bluestar. You know me too well." With a flash of her cruel smile, she added, "Don't worry. I'm not going after some shy little kit with no self-esteem. I'm more interested in the brutes who can *think*, like Sunflame."

"You and I both know that that is far from the truth, and since when could Sunflame *think*?" Bluestar snapped, shaking her head. "Just go. We will stop you in the end, don't forget it. We have the advantage here; what good warrior would ever join an evil cat to fight against their own Clan?"

Nightshade turned to leap away, though before doing so, she added, "You know, she's just a kit. She'll forget it instantly."

With that, she whisked herself away, leaping across the branches like they were stepping stones, her long legs springing her far into the night.

Bluestar watched her go silently. "Of course Silverleaf will know of this. But that prophecy helps to shape Moonkit's future. She needs to know that she is worthy of such knowledge if she is to stand apart and live *her* life."

Chapter 1

What a strange dream I just had. A cat named Firestar and a cat named Cinderstar... Wouldn't it be funny if they were real cats?

And what was that about a shattered moon?

A small white she-kit squirmed about, trying to fall back asleep, hoping to ignore the excited squeals echoing around the nursery.

"Come on, Moonkit! I want to play!"

A very pale golden she-kit nudged her sister, eyes narrowed in frustration as Moonkit simply turned around and curled back beside her mother, ears flattened.

"Palekit, stop bothering your sister. She's was awake all night, so she's tired."

The gentle, warm meow roused Moonkit from any state of tiredness that she was in. "Sunflame!" She mewed excitedly, leaping out of the curve of her mother's belly and charging over to her father.

"Hello, my little ones," her father purred, sweeping a playing Palekit over with his tail so she was sat next to her sister. "How are you?"

Moonkit's fur fluffed up. "I'm cold!" She mewed with a sudden shiver.

Sunflame let out a chuckle. "In the middle of greenleaf, and with all that fur?"

The white she-kit nodded solemnly.

"Come here, then. I'll just have to warm you up by... Taking you around the camp!"

His mate, Amberblaze, gave him a worried gaze. "Are you sure they aren't too young?" She dropped her gaze to her kits, getting up off

her side and padding over.

Sunflame's eyes narrowed, whiskers twitching with faint amusement. Moonkit's tail twitched. *What was he finding so funny?* "Who would have thought, Amberblaze, that you turned out to be an amazing mother?"

She rubbed her cheek against each of her kits', then sighed. "I just love them so much..."

While Palekit stepped away, rubbing her own cheek with her paw with a scowl on her face, Moonkit stepped into her mother, welcoming her warmth.

"Right. Shall we go?" Sunflame picked up his kits at Palekit's shrill mewl of delight, and while Moonkit didn't express her excitement, she felt a thrill of happiness as her father lifted her onto his golden back.

~

"And this is the Medicine Cat's den."

Moonkit's heart dropped as it had done the last few dens. Boring. Most likely from the inside as well.

As Palekit gave a groan that explained all of Moonkit's current emotions, Sunflame padded into the den.

"Trust me, this den's... Different."

~

The first scent to hit her was a sweet-smelling she-cat's scent.

And then, herbs.

Lots and lots of herbs.

A meow echoed around the den as a pretty silver and white she-cat padded over. "Can I help you?" Though her tone was cold, her eyes were warm as she appraised Palekit, who watched the she-cat with

a wary gaze.

Her gaze drifted to Moonkit, and held there for a while, perplexed. She began fidgeting beneath the cat's blue gaze, feeling very uncomfortable. *Is it normal for cats to stare?* However, the cat quickly shook her head, ridding it of whatever thoughts plagued it.

"Right. Well, this is the medicine den, and I'm Silverleaf."

Instantly, Palekit padded forward to a bundle of leaves and petals and bent down to sniff it, before recoiling. "It smells gross in here," she informed her father gravely. "I'll protect you, though."

"From what? Strange smells?" Moonkit rolled her eyes, giving her sister a gentle shove. It was returned with much more force, sending the white she-kit tumbling into a pile of oak leaves.

As soon as Moonkit rose to her paws again, Palekit burst out laughing, while Sunflame masked a purr without much luck. "You've got leaves all over your pelt! You should be called Treekit!"

Embarrassment rushed through Moonkit's body. She turned her head to look at her fur, and when she saw the state of it, she sighed and began to shake her pelt out.

"*Stop!* Whitepool just sorted them out from the other herbs after Goldenpaw tripped over them!"

The yowl came from Silverleaf, who darted over and began hastily yet carefully taking the leaves off of Moonkit, her sleek paws working efficiently until all the leaves were in a neat pile. She then picked the pile up in her jaws, carrying it over to a small cleft and putting them in. "Whitepool's just gone to get more honey since Willowpetal has a bad sore throat - probably from all the shouting and arguing she does - and our stock of it is non-existent. When she comes back, hopefully she won't find any white fur on her leaves."

She then gently nudged the white kit. "Look, Moonkit. Leaves go here." She gestured to the highest ledges and clefts in the rock, where leaves of all shapes, sizes and colours- but mostly green- lay on their own ledge.

Silverleaf gestured to a large crack in the rock, where several small, round objects lay in their own pile. "And this is where the seeds and berries go. Juniper and poppyseed are here. I have a small supply of deathberries, but they're only to be used when a cat's suffering is unbearable and there is nothing a medicine cat can do to save it. Of course, they're hidden. Then there's-"

"Alright, kits. You don't want to sit around listening to old Silverleaf blabber on about her smelly collectibles, do you? We still haven't seen the leaders' den!" Sunflame began to lead his kits outside of the den.

The she-cat's face turned from a focused frown to a scowl. "I am not old!" She snapped, glaring at Sunflame, who rolled his eyes, muttering, "Elders..." With a cheeky smirk.

While Palekit made a disgusted face to the harmless herbs and bounded ahead to the next den, Moonkit tried to peer over her father's shoulder. *That was interesting,* she thought to herself, trying to catch a glimpse of the pretty she-cat again. *I wonder if she's spoken to StarClan. She is a medicine cat, after all.*

After a moments' hesitation, she stopped trying to escape Sunflame and allowed him to lead her to the last den.

Moonkit glanced back once more, and was surprised to find Silverleaf's eyes fixed on her once again.

She's probably looking at Sunflame... Trying to shake off that weird feeling, she turned her gaze to her sister, watching as a butterfly sidetracked the golden kit. *A butterfly! I love butterflies.*

She shoved the strange den and its inhabitants out of her mind and with a shriek of delight, rushed over to her sister and began clumsily swatting around to try and catch the butterfly.

Chapter 2

"Bumblestar? Hello?"

Moonkit's nose twitched slightly as her sister's tail brushed against it. *Sunflame said he would be in here, so where is he?*

Palekit had entered into the den, calling out into it. It seemed empty at a first glance, but after a few seconds, a pale ginger tom emerged from the darkness. His amber eyes gleamed with laughter.

"Hello, Palekit," he purred to the kit, who had jumped back in surprise as he seemed to melt from the shadows.

Moonkit, however, stepped forward, gazing up at him curiously. "Are you really the leader of ThunderClan?" She asked. *That would mean he is in charge of everything! He's more powerful than even the medicine cats.* An unspoken respect rose in Moonkit.

With a hearty chuckle, he bent down. "I'm also Sunflame's father's brother," he whispered in her ear. Moonkit spied a quiet Palekit sneaking into Bumblestar's den, glancing around curiously, over his shoulder.

He's related to Sunflame... So he's my kin! With a thrill of happiness, she replied, "That makes you related to us as well!"

She glanced back at Sunflame for confirmation, and he nodded. "You're so like your mother," her father murmured, his tail gently resting against her back for a moment.

Palekit charged back past Moonkit suddenly, eyes wide with shock. "There are strange noises coming from there!" She shrieked.

Not in the mood for yet another game of chase around camp, the white she-kit entered the den, eyes narrowed. *It's just a leaf blowing around.* "Who's there?" She asked hesitantly, tail quivering as a tall shadow appeared.

Sunflame sat outside, chatting with Bumblestar, seemingly oblivious to the new figure. Palekit had, unsurprisingly, ran off somewhere.

However, it was followed by a not very menacing-looking she-cat, with a sleek cream-fawn pelt, and amber eyes that just shone with happiness.

Moonkit glanced around, confused and worried. "You just... Did you just..." She kept staring back and forth, from where the stone wall that she had walked from was to where she was standing, watching the kit with bemused eyes.

"Of course I did. I'm a special cat, Moonkit. I can do that."

Her mouth fell agape. "Special? How?"

The she-cat laughed, a soft, melodic sound. "Don't you worry about that. Just be careful of the shadows from now on. Don't be curious around them, for claws and thorns can hide in them sometimes."

The cat walked into the wall again, leaving behind only the faintest scent of heather and rain.

Trying to make sense of the cat, she narrowed her eyes in thought, but only one thought occurred in her head.

What a load of nonsense. I must've imagined it.

But she hadn't imagined the way that the she-cat's pelt rippled slightly as she passed right through the stone wall, or how her eyes shone with love and happiness as she took in her surroundings. She hadn't imagined any of it.

She padded out of the den, eyes still slightly narrowed in thought.

"Moonkit, are you alright?" Bumblestar broke off from the conversation. "You look like you need to use the dirtplace."

In no mood for jokes, Moonkit shook her head and padded over to Sunflame. "I'm tired. Can we go back now?"

With one last goodbye to Bumblestar, Sunflame led his kit to the

nursery.

"Where's Palekit?"

"With your mother."

A long silence fell over the two as they walked.

Just outside the den, Sunflame stopped, and told Moonkit to do so as well.

After a brief pause, he mewed hesitantly, "Moonkit, how are you... Feeling? You're not upset, are you?"

She paused, taken aback a bit by the sudden question. "What? I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

A relieved look swamped Sunflame's features, leaving Moonkit even more confused. "Good. That would be worrying."

Moonkit narrowed her eyes, heart beating faster. "Why? Have I done something wrong?"

Another brief pause, and then, "No, Moonkit. It's not you."

He then led her into the den, eyes never meeting hers as he settled down beside his mate and rested his head on top of hers.

As sweet as the sight was, Moonkit did feel slightly annoyed at her father for not looking at her or answering her questions.

The negative mood instantly disappeared as she glanced at him again. He looked exhausted, and the feeling of tiredness radiated from his pelt.

Suddenly feeling as tired as her father looked, she collapsed beside the form of her sleeping sister, eyes drifting shut.

That night, Moonkit dreamed strange dreams of strange cats.

Chapter 3

"Moonkit! Wake up!"

Amberblaze's urgent meow awoke her daughter, who squirmed as her mother grasped her scruff and carried her out of the den.

"Wha-? What was that for?" She finally managed to slide out of her mother's grasp, and landed on cool, dusty ground instead of her nest.

Amberblaze didn't hesitate to pick up Moonkit again, carrying her to the elders' den where Palekit sat with Sunflame.

"Palekit, do *you* know what's going on?" Moonkit asked her sister, who looked just as confused as she felt.

As Palekit began to shake her head, Sunflame explained. "Pebblesplash is having her kits, and Silverleaf wanted everyone out while she and Whitepool helped her. Don't go back- Silverleaf would have your heads."

A pang of longing flooded through Moonkit as she watched her parents enter the elder's den. Why couldn't she see the new kits be born? The chances were that they would become her new best friends soon after, so shouldn't she be able to meet them first?

Seeming to pick up on her sadness, Palekit turned to her. "Hey, Moonkit. It's alright. We'll get to see them soon."

She shrugged, and though both of her parents had entered the den, she sat outside, gaze fixed on the nursery.

After a few more moments, her sister let out a gasp. "What if we go to the den and spy on them?"

Is she serious? "Are you serious?" Moonkit couldn't believe that her sister would do something like that. Yes, she was certainly

mischievous, but she didn't usually disobey her parents.

"Of course I'm serious. You want to go and see the kits be born, don't you?"

Moonkit scuffed her paw against the earth. Of course she *wanted* to, but she didn't want to go against Sunflame's word.

She voiced her concerns to Palekit, who just scoffed. "Nobody will know, scaredy-mouse." She nudged Moonkit to her paws. "Come on."

I can't believe I'm doing this... "Fine. But I'm blaming this one on you," she finally muttered.

"Wouldn't dream of having it any other way. Now come *on*!"

~

By the time they got to the den, the medicine cats were exiting, tails drooping in exhaustion.

"Quick, hide!" Moonkit hissed, but it was too late.

"Palekit, Moonkit, what are you doing here?" Whitepool had turned her head and spotted the two kits.

While Palekit stuttered, trying to come up with a good excuse, Moonkit answered quickly and as honestly as she could, "We wanted to see our new denmates."

Silverleaf turned, then, and her eyes instantly locked with Moonkit's. Surprise registered in her features. After a few heartbeats of hesitation, she padded away quickly, fetching something from her den, before returning with a bundle of hairy leaves in her jaws. "Well, if you really want to, Moonkit, could you give this to Pebblesplash? It's borage- it'll help her milk to come. I'm sure that you will be allowed to see her kits afterwards."

Snatching the herbs off of the ground on her way, Moonkit darted for the nursery.

~

"Pebblesplash, Silverleaf told me to give these to you," Moonkit murmured quietly, trying not to wake the precious kits tucked into Pebblesplash's belly, suckling silently.

Palekit had waited outside, acting as a parent lookout, while Moonkit padded in.

Pebblesplash had given birth to a tom and a she-cat. Both kits' fur seemed to resemble neither of their parents, but the tom had a large, sturdy build, much like his father. He had black fur, while his sister was a mottled tortoiseshell. Ginger and black patches adorned her fur, but most of her body was covered in a deep red. She had a dainty frame that reminded Moonkit of neither the kit's mother or any of her older siblings. She briefly wondered which of their relatives they had received their fur colour from.

"Wow..." Moonkit breathed, eyes widening. "They're incredible."

An exhausted Pebblesplash lifted her head and nodded weakly, then lowered it again.

Suddenly, she was nudged out of the den as Oakfur dived in, his tail knocking her away on accident. "Oh, Pebblesplash... They're great," he murmured.

The rest of the conversation was muffled as Sunflame rushed over, guiding his kits away with his tail. "You ignored me!" He meowed, anger edging his voice. "Anything could have been happening in that den- badgers could be attacking, rogues fighting, twolegs..." *But they weren't, and I knew that*, she wanted to reply, but held her tongue instead.

"You have to listen to your parents." Sunflame turned to each kit in turn. "Look, Palekit, I expect this kind of behaviour from you, but Moonkit? You're better than that."

Palekit looked hurt, but Moonkit only felt the disappointment radiating off her father. "I'm sorry..." She murmured, suddenly

feeling really guilty.

Her father swept her to the side. "It's alright, Moonkit. Just please don't disobey me again. I'm responsible for you- I'm your father- and if anything happened to you, I would feel terrible. It's lucky that this time there were no rogues attacking, or badgers, or twolegs, or foxes, or hawks..."

Moonkit tuned out of Sunflame's list of predators and turned her head slightly. She caught a glimpse of Palekit, whose eyes were on her paws. *She probably feels annoyed,* she finally conceded. *She doesn't always do bad things. Only sometimes, and it's usually to help me when she does.*

With a sigh, Moonkit turned back to her father, whose stern gaze had softened. "Alright, I'll try not to get into trouble," she agreed quietly, tail twitching from side to side. She needed to talk to Palekit.

"Alright. Well, it's late now, and you and Palekit-" *Finally, he mentions Palekit!* "-are probably very tired."

She nodded, and let out a yawn, just as Palekit began to as well.

"Let's get you two to your nest." He murmured quietly. "That is, assuming that Pebblesplash has had her kits already?"

He looked to Moonkit for approval, who nodded. "Then let's go."

~

Curled up in her shared nest with Palekit- at three moons old, Amberblaze had insisted that they were old enough to practise for the apprentices' den, and now they shared a nest, and Amberblaze and Sunflame, who insisted he sleep with his mate and kits, shared one- Moonkit couldn't sleep.

It was a calm, silent night, aside from the occasional *pitter patter* of light rainfall here and there, but Moonkit felt restless. She lifted her head and peered out of the den, and, upon seeing the clearing moonlit and empty, decided to sit outside.

As she got to her paws, something moved to take her space; Palekit's stubby tail.

With a silent chuckle to her sister's tail's antics, she climbed out of the nest, padding out of the den, into the cool night...

And collided with Whitepool.

Chapter 4

"Oof!"

Whitepool's voice was muffled as Moonkit hit her chest.

"Careful!" The she-cat said, gently nudging the kit away. She was about to continue walking, but paused. "What are you doing out here? You should be with your mother, Moonkit."

Moonkit sighed. "Well, I..." She trailed off, trying to find a good excuse, but found none; why *was* she out here? "I don't know." She admitted earnestly. "I just can't sleep."

Whitepool nodded. "Neither can I, and rather than waste time trying to get back to sleep, I thought I'd check on Pebblesplash's kits."

The white she-cat sat down, patting the cool earth beside her for Moonkit to join her. She joined the medicine cat, and soon enough they were huddling to share each other's warmth. Though it was late green-leaf, it was still rather cold in the evening, and Moonkit was in no mood to freeze to death.

"Why can't you sleep?" Moonkit asked the medicine cat, inquisition probing her to ask.

However, Whitepool's eyes quickly became guarded with light suspicion. "Medicine cat business." She mewed. "Sorry."

Moonkit's eyes narrowed. "That means prophecies and StarClan stuff, doesn't it?" She asked, thinking deeply. *I remember Sunflame telling Palekit and I about the role of a medicine cat, and the main roles were to relay prophecies from StarClan to the leader and Clan.*

Whitepool seemed impressed. "Yes, Moonkit, it does mean that."

The small kit edged forward. "What kind of StarClan stuff is it?"

Whitepool's paws fidgeted. "I can't really tell *you*..." *She's nervous;*

she's fidgeting. It must be special, if a medicine cat is nervous about it.

Moonkit blinked at her, eyes wide and innocent. "I'll probably forget about it in the morning. Besides, I want to know." She paused, then added, "I won't leave you until you tell me." Whitepool narrowed her eyes. *Oh no... Did I go too far?*

The white medicine cat opened her mouth, about to respond, when a silver and white she-cat emerged from the medicine den. "Whitepool! What are you doing out so late? And with- wait, is that Moonkit?"

Whitepool's ears flattened. She looked as guilty as an apprentice who'd stolen extra prey. "Yes..." She mewed, cast a glance towards Moonkit, then replied, "What of it?"

Silverleaf sighed, shaking her head. "Whitepool..."

The white cat shook her head as well, imitating her mentor. "Silverleaf... You always assume that I'm doing something wrong, or against you." *What? Is talking to me against Silverleaf's orders? What does that cat have against me?* "Can't I just enjoy a pleasant conversation with a friend?"

The pretty medicine cat wouldn't hear of it. "Don't play mouse-brained with me, young she-cat." She then turned to Moonkit. "What were you talking about?"

She bounced up and down eagerly, excited. "Whitepool was about to tell me a prophecy!" She mewed joyfully. *If Silverleaf knows this, she'll approve it- I know it!*

Whitepool's gaze turned defiant. "I was not!" She mewed to Moonkit.

"Was too!"

"Was not!"

"Was too!"

"Was n-"

"Both of you, stop acting like grumpy badgers and *stop arguing!*" Silverleaf's gaze burned into Whitepool's with fury, causing the younger medicine cat to drop her gaze quietly, murmuring, "Sorry..."

She then turned her scorching blue gaze to Moonkit, who was pawing the ground. "And you, young kit, should be in your nest, not bothering my fellow medicine cat while she- Whitepool, what were you doing?"

Her sudden confrontation caused the white she-cat to jump. She scuffed her one grey paw, before meowing, "I was... Checking on Pebblesplash."

"And why were you doing that?"

Whitepool cast a nervous glance to Moonkit. "Maybe it's best you go back to your nest."

She nudged the small kit back into her den.

Moonkit wasn't tired, however. She sat at the entrance of the den, hidden by a mass of brambles, ears pricked as she listened to the medicine cats.

"It's about..."

But Moonkit didn't hear the rest of the sentence. The white she-kit's eyes narrowed. What was it about?

She leaned forward eagerly, but a bit too far; she toppled over onto her head, letting out an audible *thud*.

"Maybe it's better to talk somewhere where ears and eyes can't be spies," Silverleaf murmured, and with a hum of agreement from Whitepool, two sets of pawsteps padded away.

Moonkit did return to her nest, but she didn't sleep well; her mind, no matter how much she tried to think of nice things, kept recalling the strangely worried tone that Whitepool had been using with Silverleaf. It was as if she had just been told something really important.

With a shaky sigh, Moonkit closed her eyes, ears pressed against her sister's chest so she could hear her breathing.

After a short while, the relaxing sound lulled Moonkit into a gentle sleep.

Chapter 5

"Hey, Palekit! Get up!"

Palekit's jaws stretched in a large yawn, before she finally opened her blue-ish grey eyes. *What does Moonkit want this time?* "What do you want now?" She asked her sister, shooting her a glare.

Two moons had passed since the two sisters had been first showed around camp, and they were allowed to freely roam their home, under the supervision of their parents watching from the nursery.

"It's my turn, and I say we're going to the elders' den!"

Palekit was instantly awake, rolling herself onto her paws. "Not the elders' den!"

Since Palekit and her sister had been able to explore by themselves, they had set up a plan; each day, one would choose where they would be going.

However, this didn't always end up working. For instance, Palekit hated the elders' den. It smelled of old cats and herbs. Moonkit only went to the elders' den or the medicine cats' den, so when she did, Palekit would often try to sneak away to her den of choice; the apprentices' den.

Goldenpaw and Spottedpaw weren't really friends of hers, but besides Moonkit, who would always be her best friend no matter what, Lilypaw and Ivypaw were great fun to play with, and Owlpaw was an excellent listener whenever Palekit told him her bright ideas.

As she trudged after her sister, Palekit spied Spottedpaw and Goldenpaw speaking to Thistlepaw. Every now and then, they would glance up at Moonkit and snicker something to the others, and occasionally their gaze would land on Palekit, making her feel uncomfortable.

Despite his siblings' kindness towards the two, Thistlepaw hated Moonkit and Palekit- specifically Palekit. She had no idea why.

"Hey, Palekit! Are you coming, or are you just going to stare all day at your future mate?"

She realised she'd stopped, though was still watching Thistlepaw, who glared at her. Upon hearing Moonkit's meow, she jumped, causing the older apprentices and Thistlepaw to laugh.

"I hate him! He's not my future mate!" She hissed to Moonkit, who just grinned.

"Sure." Her sister replied cheekily, then led the way into the elders' den.

~

In the den, Gingerheart was sleeping soundly in her nest, her honey-coloured pelt slowly rising and sinking, her breathing even.

Thrushwhisker and Redfeather were both wide awake, however, speaking quietly in hushed voices.

This is boring. Palekit thought unhappily as the den completely ignored them. *They're not even looking at us, let alone talking to us.*

Palekit's thoughts diminished as Moonkit cleared her throat, causing Redfeather to jump up, then turn to the kit.

"Ah, Moonkit, dear! Welcome in!" The elder immediately swept up the kits with her russet tail, but Palekit narrowly avoided it, sitting by the entrance of the unpopulated den.

"Tell me a story!" Moonkit begged, jumping up.

Palekit never saw her sister show much enthusiasm, so it was a shock to see her so open with these cats.

The brown-eyed she-cat watched Palekit for a while, then turned back to Moonkit. "A story? About... Firestar, maybe?"

At the moment, Firestar was Moonkit's favourite topic. She would always listen to the elders' stories about him with wide eyes, eager for more.

Palekit was the complete opposite.

She herself found the clan's history of leaders rather boring, even if they had been specifically chosen by StarClan to lead, been noble, became kittypets...

She rolled her eyes as she recalled the leaders, and gave a small shudder. *I've been around the elders far too long.*

As Redfeather began her story, Thrushwhisker butting in to add details that she had forgotten, Palekit exited the den.

And bumped straight into Thistlepaw.

"Watch it!" He snarled, and lashing his tail in Palekit's face, he stormed off,
Saying, "Kits just don't know anything."

Though her fur bristled with anger and she longed to throw a retort at him, Palekit couldn't help but wonder why he was heading to the elders' den.

With a shrug of her shoulders, Palekit got up, ready to head back into the elders' den- she didn't want another encounter with the rude tom- but was stopped by a friendly meow.

"Palekit! Hello!" Hazelshade's warm purr welcomed the she-kit, and she turned around to see the she-cat putting a hare down at her paws. "This is for the elders; could you take it to them for me? I have to talk with Bumblestar."

Talking with the leader? It must be about something important!
Immediately Palekit tried to lift the rabbit, but ended up dragging it a fox-length across to the entrance. "Redfeather! Thrushwhisker! Hazelsh- I mean, I- got you this!

Thrushwhisker padded stiffly over to the she-kit, tenderly picking up the hare with slow movements. "Thank you, Palekit." He purred

softly, then began trudging back to his nest.

Palekit hesitated, before padding back into the den, her small paws aching from the dragging of the prey.

She gently settled herself at the edge of the den once more, perched in her usual place. The elders may have been boring, but it was warm, and Palekit, though she loved playing, hated the cold.

She lay down, head resting on her paws as she watched her sister, who was still captivated by the story. Then, when the wiry brown tom placed the meal at Redfeather's paws, they shared it, inviting Moonkit in to have a bite.

I wish I had friends like that. She thought quietly. *All the apprentices don't mind me being there, but I think they prefer to train and gossip than hang around with a little kit.*

Watching the elders wistfully, she curled her tail around herself and listened to the story, even if it was boring.

Chapter 6

"Noo! I can't take it, Palestar! Stop it!"

"Never!"

"Then I'll just have to attack ThunderClan!"

Palekit gasped dramatically. "You wouldn't!" She yowled, and leapt on top of a crouched Sunflame.

Her father seemed prepared, however, and rolled her off of his back with a paw almost immediately. "ShadowClan, attack!"

And he jumped on Palekit.

Obviously, he made sure that it didn't hurt her, but even if it had been meant to, it wouldn't have even touched her because she rolled out of the way, creeping round a "surprised" Sunflame, then leapt onto his back. "You'll never beat ThunderClan, weak Sunstar!" She boasted playfully.

She was surprised when Sunflame went still, but nonetheless excited. "Ha! I win!"

Then he flung himself up, sending the small she-kit skidding away in the dust- on her paws, thankfully. "Think again, Palestar."

"Why, when I get my paws on you, you slimy, frog-eating, ShadowClan-"

"I think that's quite enough fighting, Palestar and Sunstar." Amberblaze padded over to where the two were scuffling in the camp, sitting down beside them. Moonkit padded next to her, her fur shining.

It was sun-high, and most of the warriors were returning from their patrols. Sunflame had been playing with his golden kit since sunrise, when she'd practically attacked him in his nest.

"Let's go!" She had yowled in his ear, almost waking up the rest of the den. Three-moon old kits stirred beside Pebblesplash, who raised her head quietly and settled them again.

She had repeated it quieter, though her father simply groaned and turned away.

Then, she had gotten the best idea yet; she'd jump on him until he got up.

It didn't end well.

As soon as Amberblaze caught sight of Palekit's pelt, dusty and rustled and riddled with dirt from her mock battle, she let out a gasp of horror. "Sunflame! How could you let her pelt get like that on a day like this?"

A day like what? Palekit couldn't help but wonder, and one glance at her sister showed that she didn't know either.

Amberblaze was about to set to work on grooming her daughter when an ear-splitting yowl made Palekit's fur bristle. The two were instantly nudged forward by their parents, over to the crowd of now-assembling cats.

Moonkit hissed under her breath to her sister, "We're not allowed to Clan gatherings; We're kits. Have they forgotten that?"

Palekit just shrugged; who was she to say what her parents did?

They turned around to their parents in unison, and Palekit asked, "Uh... why are we here? We're supposed to stay in the nursery for Clan meetings, since we can't catch our own prey." *Though I bet we could if we were allowed to try...*

Sunflame just smiled at his confused kit, gently nudging her forward. "You'll soon see," he murmured. Then he and Amberblaze shared an ecstatic gaze. *What are they so happy about?*

As Palekit sat wondering that, Bumblestar began his meeting. "I have two things to do now. First of all, Goldenpaw? Spottedpaw?"

He beckoned the two apprentices forward with a flick of his tail, then their mentors. "Shrewfoot? Rowanfur? Do your apprentices deserve what they are about to recieve?"

Palekit's head snapped up. "Wait. Are Goldenpaw and Spottedpaw are becoming warriors already?"

"And it's about time, too," Sunflame murmured quietly. "They're great hunters, fighters, trackers... Better than some of our elder warriors." He nodded to himself, causing both of his kits to giggle.

However, Amberblaze seemed to give a sigh of distaste at her mate when she noticed how prideful his gaze was when his gaze rested on the old apprentices.

Palekit shrugged to herself and turned back to the ceremony.

"Goldenpaw is good as gold, as her name suggests." Shrewfoot replied to his leader, proud gaze on his apprentice.

Rowanfur added, "And Spottedpaw is excelling in everything I throw at her."

With a nod, Bumblestar returned to the two apprentices in front of him. "Then in that case, I call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and in return I commend them to you as warriors."

He first turned to the golden she-cat, and Palekit was confused to see Bumblestar's features overcome with a shocked look.

He shook his head, then meowed, "Goldenpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

The golden she-cat, after sharing an excited glance towards her sister, nodded. "I do."

Bumblestar's gaze flickered between the cats in his Clan, before he replied, "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Goldenpaw, from now on you will be known as Goldenlight.

StarClan honors your skill and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Though Palekit didn't like Goldenpaw or her sister much at all- they were rude to her, and bullied Moonkit often- she still felt a thrill of awe for the she-cat. If Palekit had been becoming a warrior- or even an apprentice- she would be bouncing with excitement. How did she keep so cool about it all?

Palekit glanced over to Moonkit, who was watching the new warrior with the same awe as she had a few moments ago. "They're so calm," she mewed to her sister, who nodded, yellow eyes narrowed. "When we become warriors, when we gain our full names, I know that at least I won't be sitting still, let alone you."

Palekit gave her sister an affectionate shove, and watched as her shoulder left a mark of dust on the kit's white pelt. She quickly began to use her tail to brush it off, but that only smudged it further.

With a muttered apology, Palekit shuffled away, her sister giving her a strange look, as if to say, "What are you talking about?" Then she saw the mud on her shoulder and gave a disgusted sigh, rolling her eyes.

"Really?" She muttered under her breath to her sister, who shrugged.

"Sorry..."

Sunflame and Amberblaze cuffed both of the kits round the head. "Shh! Spottedpaw is about to recieve her warrior name!"

Palekit's gaze snapped up, and she suddenly realised that the whole Clan were watching the two kits speak to each other.

When Thistlepaw caught sight of Palekit's pelt, he scoffed. "Looks like somecat decided to bathe in fox-dung, "He meowed snidely, eyes narrowing with glee at his own joke. However, nobody laughed. Ivypaw gave him a cuff around the head, which did make his sister and brother snicker.

"May I continue?" Asked Bumblestar, tail twitching in faint irritation. "As I was saying... Spottedpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

The gold-spotted she-cat nodded immediately. "I do!"

Palekit heard Amberblaze scoff. *What has she got against Honeywhisker and her kits?* She couldn't help but wonder.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name: Spottedpaw, from this day forth you shall be known as Spottedrose. StarClan honors your optimism and kindness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

The cheer for their new names went up immediately; they were well-liked cats among the Clan. Loudest of all was Honeywhisker, Ashcloud sat beside her and calling almost as enthusiastically as her.

This time, Sunflame scoffed. "I thought he loved Heathermist." He muttered under his breath.

Amberblaze immediately got up. "He does- or did. But why should you care that they're mates now? Do you still-"

Sunflame interrupted her. "It's because Ashcloud loved my sister, not her. I wouldn't give a hair on my pelt for Honeywhisker."

What in StarClan are they talking about? Palekit shared a glance with her sister, who just shrugged. Then, both turned their heads to Bumblestar once more. *What could be the final announcement?*

This time, Bumblestar's gaze rested on Palekit and her sister. He didn't seem to notice the fact that Palekit's parents were still bickering.

"Palekit, Moonkit, step forward."

Palekit jumped. "What's going on?" She asked her sister. She then turned to Bumblestar. "If it's about those beetles I put in Moonkit's nest the other day, I'm sorry!"

A "Hey!" Came from Moonkit.

Bumblestar laughed and shook his head. "Of course not! Why would I call the Clan together for *that?* But you do need to tell Moonkit that you're sorry."

She immediately turned to her sister. "Sorry, Moonkit." She meowed, genuine regret lining her voice.

With a word of understanding from her sister, she turned back to the leader. "But... If we're not gathered here for that, why have you called *us* up?"

Bumblestar, and many other clanmates- including their own parents, who had finally stopped bickering- began to laugh. "For your apprentice ceremony, of course!"

Chapter 7

"For your apprentice ceremony, of course!"

The words rang in Moonkit's ears like he'd just yowled in her face. They were becoming apprentices? Already?

One shared glance with her sister told her that she felt the same way.

Stunned, she got to her paws, Palekit following her as she did so.

"Step forward, kits."

Both did.

Bumblestar began the ceremony. "Palekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and so it is time for you to become an apprentice. Palekit, from this day on until you recieve your warrior name, you will be known as Palepaw."

Eyes quickly scanning the crowd, Bumblestar singled out one tortoiseshell; Sorrelspots.

"Sorrelspots, you recieved excellent training from Swanfeather, and I expect you to pass down all of your skills to Palepaw."

The warrior seemed ready to burst with happiness at this, and so did her apprentice; Palekit knew that Sorrelspots was one of the most fun mentors. Palekit was so happy, the feeling radiated off of her pelt, and Moonkit soon caught her smile as if it were contagious and awaited her turn.

When it finally came, she stepped forward eagerly. "Moonkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and you are ready to become an apprentice. From this day forth until you-"

"Bumblestar?" A voice from somewhere in the crowd meowed. Moonkit didn't recognise it until Silverleaf padded through the

throng of cats, Whitepool by her tail. "I'd like to interrupt you just there."

The leader, shocked, simply narrowed his eyes, though didn't say a word more.

Every eye was on Silverleaf.

The medicine cat seemed to choose her words carefully. "I have been thinking carefully about this, and, no offence or anything to your choice- I'm sure Ashcloud would have made a great mentor..." Both Bumblestar and Ashcloud gave a confused "huh?" *How had she known who my mentor was going to be?* Moonkit wondered with a glance towards Bumblestar, who clearly felt the same way.

Then, a cat from the Clan- was it Oakfur or Toadfur?- called, "Spit it out then!"

Silverleaf turned around to snap a retort at the tom, but Whitepool gently tapped her on the shoulder and murmured something in her ear.

She replied in a rather loud hiss, "I'm not your apprentice." But kept the insult in her mind, turning back to Bumblestar.

"Well? Silverleaf, has something happened? Has StarClan shown you something about this?"

Acknowledging Bumblestar's meow with a flick of her ear, Silverleaf turned her head to the crowd of cats, eyes scanning them.

"Cats of ThunderClan," She begun. "You may think that this is rather sudden, but..."

She now turned to Moonkit, her pale gaze fixing onto cold yellow eyes. And for that moment, Moonkit felt only quiet confidence.

And then, Moonkit knew exactly what was coming next.

"I wish to take Moonkit on as my apprentice."

Chapter 8

"What?" Moonkit's meow was the loudest of all, despite her parents' confused 'Huh?'s. She got up, taking a step towards her sister, as cats of all ages came closer and got a look at her, as if she was some kind of weird new herb.

She felt her pelt bristle. "Leave me alone. Stop looking at me," she attempted to shout, but it came out in a half squeak, half whisper. Instead, she just shuffled closer to her sister.

"She has shown great intelligence and I would like to train her as a medicine cat."

"You have two medicine cats already!" Cried Sunflame, who clearly didn't want his daughter to be a medicine cat. "Why can't she just train to be a warrior?" He asked helplessly, sweeping his long tail around his kits as if he thought it would protect them from the world.

Silverleaf scoffed. "Don't tell me who I can and can't mentor, Sunflame. I helped Hazelshade give birth to you." She turned around to face Bumblestar. "Look, Bumblestar. I'll give you the longer story later, but this kit should be a medicine cat."

There was something about the way that she said 'should' that worried Moonkit. She didn't know why.

Bumblestar still didn't look convinced. "Why don't we just ask Moonkit what she thinks? You can't force someone to be something they don't want to be."

All eyes turned to Moonkit again, and she felt that pressure again. "I..." She mewed quietly, deciding. She turned her gaze to her father, who seemed pleading, then to Silverleaf, who seemed so sure of herself.

After a brief pause, she shook her head to Silverleaf. "I don't want to

learn about herbs and how to help cats. I want to train as a warrior apprentice."

Liar. A small voice echoed inside her head. *You're a liar.*

She ignored it.

A horrified 'What?' came from Silverleaf, while the rest of the Clan murmured amongst one another. Moonkit turned her gaze to the leader. "That is okay, isn't it? I can be a normal apprentice?"

A nod came from Bumblestar, hesitant as it might be. "Yes... I suppose so." He nodded to Ashcloud. "I hope he passes on all that he knows to you, Moonpaw." He meowed, flicking his tail dismissively. He then leapt down and followed Silverleaf to her den.

Moonpaw barely heard her sister's excited purr. "We can train together now!"

After a heartbeat, her words registered and she nodded, forcing a purr as Ashcloud padded over to greet her, followed by Sorrelspots.

Should I have lied? Moonpaw wondered guiltily, gaze focused mainly on her paws no matter how hard she tried to keep her head up and be happy.

With a glance towards her father, who was watching his two kits happily from the warriors' den, she nodded to herself. *As long as it makes my family happy, it makes me happy.*

Chapter 9

I am not happy.

Those were the only words Palepaw thought as she pulled her paw out of a muddy patch in the wet earth, flinching every time a large splash of rain landed on her head.

During her second day as an apprentice- the first had been spent exploring the territory- Palepaw had been given the task of collecting moss for the elders' nests.

It would have been an alright task- Palepaw enjoyed exploring the territory- had it not been raining.

Moonpaw got the better of the job; she stayed nice and dry in the elders' den, searching their pelts for ticks.

With an annoyed sigh, Palepaw narrowly avoided another puddle; she'd pulled her paws out of two wet puddles- which were actually marshy holes in disguise- already, and didn't want to get them even muddier.

"Come on, Palepaw!" The call belonged to Ivypaw, who had partnered up with her, whilst her brothers and sisters had chosen to do the elders' ticks. "If we hurry to the sycamores, we can get back quicker!"

"I don't see why we have to do this." She muttered to her friend, not even bothering to quicken her pace. "The moss will be wet. What's the point in collecting it now? Can't we just wait until it's dry, then come out here?"

As Palepaw swerved to avoid yet another puddle, Ivypaw let out a frustrated sigh. "Don't ask me. Mentor logic is so dumb." She kicked over a pebble with a paw, ears flattened against her head.

The two trekked along the territory for a while, and at sun-high,

they reached the sycamore trees near the edge of their territory. They looked out onto a forest of birch and aspen, where the rain that fell was calm, almost peaceful, in a way.

"It's pretty." Ivypaw noted quietly, her amber eyes absorbing the sight before them. Palepaw had to agree.

"Let's just collect this moss." She tugged her gaze away from the view, padding towards the roots of a sycamore tree, where damp moss grew. She began carefully collecting it, precise cuts with her claws allowing her to keep it whole and avoid shredding it.

"There." She announced when she had finished. "Now, let's get this back." She turned around to see Ivypaw with a bundle of her own moss, waiting patiently as she watched it soak up water from a puddle.

"Why are you getting it wetter?" Palepaw asked, eyes narrowing in confusion. "I thought we wanted dry moss for beddings. We don't want the elders to get aching joints." She spoke as if it were obvious, though inwardly doubted her method. M*aybe Ivypaw knows something I don't about moss collecting.*

Ivypaw seemed pleased with herself. "Just the other day, I saw Swanfeather carrying some soaked moss to Redfeather. She said it was wonderful of him to get a drink for her. I figured that since we're collecting moss, why not carry water to them as well?"

The younger apprentice was awestruck by Ivypaw's plan. "And then they drink up the water so their throats aren't dry and their bedding isn't wet? Ivypaw, that's amazing!"

Hastily, she scampered to a puddle and dropped her moss into it, watching as it slowly grew in size.

Once it had finished, she nodded to herself. "Perfect. Let's go."

~

Padding through the camp, Palepaw and Ivypaw received a few confused stares at the soaked moss, but Palepaw paid them no attention as she led her friend to the elders' den, placing it by the

entrance with a splat. "Drink up, elders!" She shouted into the den.

Redfeather and Thrushwhisker lay huddled together as Moonpaw and Owlpaw searched their pelts for ticks. Lilypaw and Thistlepaw were sat with Gingerheart, sorting her ticks out. *And by that,* she thought with a tinge of annoyance, *I mean that Lilypaw is doing all the work while Thistlepaw just glares at everyone else like they had just told him that he smelled like the ShadowClan dirtplace.*

When Redfeather and Thrushwhisker glanced up, they barely held straight faces. "You brought us soaked moss..." Redfeather meowed, a small smile breaking out on her features. "In the middle of a rainstorm?"

At that, Gingerheart glanced up, giving a shriek of undisguised horror. "Palepaw! What is this? If we wanted a drink, we could just step outside!"

Instant shame filled Palepaw, though it was nothing compared to the look on Ivypaw's face. "I... I'm sorry. It was my idea, so it's my fault." She instantly covered for her friend, who flashed her a confused look.

The elderly she-cat didn't seem at all impressed. "I want you two to take that bundle of... Water, and drain it of its liquid. I don't want to see you again until that moss is dry."

Redfeather spoke up. "Gingerheart, like you've just said, it's the middle of a rainstorm. Can you really expect two new apprentices to do something like that in such a short time? We'll just have to keep our old bedding for a bit longer. Nothing a tough warrior like you can't handle, I'm sure." The red she-cat winced as Owlpaw cracked a tick on her shoulder. "There he is, the nasty bloodsucker."

With a grumble about how apprentices were always so insensitive, Gingerheart muttered, "Fine. But I want this moss dry by the crack of dawn. No exceptions!"

Both apprentices instantly darted off, barely stopping to pick up the moss on their way out.

~

"Well, that could have gone better." Palepaw had shrugged the guilt off a while back, though the brown-pawed apprentice's face told other stories.

"I'm such a mouse-brain." She whined miserably, ears flattened as she groomed her pelt. The two had shaken most of the water out of the moss, then laid it out next to their nests. "I'll never become a warrior."

Palepaw scoffed. "How could they not make you a warrior? First off. You're amazing. Second, the Clan could always do with more warriors. Third of all, if you fail your final assessment, you can always take another. Unless you literally can't hunt or fight well enough- which I know you can- so therefore you must become a warrior some point in your life."

Ivypaw narrowed her eyes. "Your logic is confusing." She muttered, and with one last strike of her tongue on her pelt, she lay down. Palepaw did so too, curling up in her nest and welcoming the warmth that it brought with it.

Soon after, the other apprentices padded in, but Palepaw was well on her way to dreaming by the time they had even arrived.

Chapter 10

When Moonpaw awoke the following morning, it was sun-high, and the sun shone warmly upon the camp.

"Moonpaw? Get up."

Ashcloud's gentle voice echoed around the den as he peered in. Moonpaw's ears flattened as the grey tom gently nudged her. "Come on. It's time to get up."

But I don't want to get up... The she-cat heaved a long sigh, then got to her paws. "What now?"

"You and Palepaw are going hunting soon. I wanted to let you know."

Moonpaw nodded sleepily, getting to her paws. "Okay."

Ashcloud gave her an incredulous look. "That's all? You're going to catch your first piece of prey and all you have to say is 'okay?' I nearly fainted!"

Shocked, she meowed, "I can't imagine you as an apprentice. You're so... Serious."

This made the tom laugh. "Trust me, I was anything but serious at the start of my apprenticeship. My, oh my, that feels like a long time ago. Your father was newborn when I'd started training- I used to play with him. Well, that was until my father told me that he was supposed to be avoided. I didn't understand why, and now, though I've seen what his father- your grandfather- can do, I see some sense in his words, but I do not understand why his kit would cause any trouble. In fact, he was one of the calmer ones. His sisters... They were another story."

Suddenly, as if the mention of Heathermist and Ivyfrost had jabbed him with sharp claws, Ashcloud winced. "Heathermist... She was my

mate for a few days. I'm sure you know that, though. I'm also sure that you know that I have a new mate now, Honeywhisker."

The tom clearly hadn't realised that he was lecturing her on his life, but Moonpaw didn't mind. It was something he did often. She allowed him to talk, smiling awkwardly and nodding occasionally.

After another minute of talking, he cleared his throat. "I'm... Sorry about that. I know I have a tendency to talk."

She shrugged. "It's alright." She meowed earnestly with a flick of her tail.

The ashen tom nodded, then led the way out of camp. "We'll start with mice today, and hopefully move on from there."

"Hopefully," she muttered quietly.

"What was that?"

She hurried along to match her pace with his, though it was hard due to her small size. "Nothing!"

In all honesty, she didn't expect to move on; she had never really found hunting interesting, so she'd be surprised it she got it right first try. *Or ever at all,* she added silently.

She turned to her side just in time to see Palepaw skid to a halt beside her, with Sorrelspots approaching with a yawn. The tortoiseshell's pelt was ruffled with sleep still.

"I don't see why we have to get up so early," Palepaw complained.

Her mentor's gaze was stern. "It's so we can get more training into the day. Besides, if cats attacked the Clan early in the morning, we have to be up to defend it."

"Well, that's not a very good answer. What if someone attacks at night?" Moonpaw barely heard her sister's reply; it was quiet, since she'd muttered it.

"There's a reason for camp guards." Sorrelspots had definitely heard

it, and due to the tone of her voice she didn't like how her apprentice answered back to her.

"Right. Let's get going, shall we?" Ashcloud quickly cut off any further argument.

"You're coming with us?" Moonpaw felt her heart leap. Perhaps this wouldn't be boring, after all.

She joined her sister as she followed their mentors, who led the way through the forest.

Rain from the day before dripped off of the trees, splashing Moonpaw in the face more than once, though the ground had dried considerably; her paws didn't sink into the ground, and she didn't get mud on her paws.

"Right." Ashcloud meowed suddenly as the group came to a halt. "Moonpaw and I will stay here, and you can go a little further on. We'll both go to different places, so our apprentices will experience solitary hunting."

Immediately, Moonpaw's heart dropped. So she wasn't going to be with her sister?

"Race you!" Sorrelspots suddenly called to Palepaw, then broke off into a sprint, her sister immediately in pursuit.

She watched as both cats bounded off, jealousy striking her. *How come she gets the fun mentor?* She wondered gloomily, then mentally clawed herself for it. *Don't be rude*, she scolded herself. *Ashcloud's great. And besides, you wouldn't enjoy the fun that Palepaw has with Sorrelspots.*

While that was true, she still couldn't shake off the envy, no matter how hard she tried.

"Moonpaw?" Ashcloud's level meow shattered her thoughts, and she turned around. "I want you to go to the sycamores. Mice often hide within their roots, and it is your job to catch them. But first," he meowed, getting into a hunters' crouch, "I'm going to show you how."

He began stalking towards a twitching bush, then neatly pounced on it.

He picked up his catch, a small hare, and placed it by her paws. "What did you notice about that technique?" He asked her.

She stared at him. She was supposed to pick up on it by watching just once? "Uh... You... You were very quiet."

"Yes. And?"

Again? "You were... You were almost silent."

The tom looked faintly irritated. "And?"

When she didn't reply, he added, "How was I being so quiet?"

She closed her eyes, remembering back to when he'd been stalking along the ground. "You didn't let your tail touch the ground?" She guessed.

He nodded, a look of relief in his eyes. "Yes- thank StarClan you got there in the end- and I also tried to step lightly. For prey with big ears, such as rabbits, it is good to keep quiet, but for smaller animals like mice, you must make sure that you are stepping lightly; mice, voles, shrews and squirrels will all feel you coming, and hares and rabbits will hear you. Most birds will see you first, though."

Moonpaw nodded, trying to remember it all. "So in a moment, with the mice, I have to... Not let them hear me?"

Ashcloud sighed, frustration tinging his meow. "Yes, of course, but you have to mainly focus about not putting your paws down too hard; they have good hearing, but their most developed skill is their ability to feel vibrations through the ground."

Moonpaw nodded once more. "Step lightly. Got it."

Ashcloud sighed, evidently relieved that she'd finally gotten it. "Then off you go. Remember what I just showed you, and don't forget to step lightly!"

The white she-cat darted off, sprinting as fast as she could in the direction that she'd been pointing to.

Chapter 11

Palepaw hadn't really been able to listen to Sorrelspots' explanation of what to do when hunting; she'd been too excited for the thrill of catching her very first prey.

"Before you know it, I'll be a warrior!" She had yowled proudly. With a laugh, Sorrelspots sent her on her way.

Now, at the sycamores that towered over her trembling body like twolegs, she felt a shiver crawl up her spine, as if a spider were scaling her back. What if she didn't catch a thing? What if she never caught anything?

She mentally scolded herself for being so immature when Sorrelspots had been explaining what to do. Wracking her brain, she could only remember how Sorrelspots hadn't allowed her tail to move too much; it had been still.

She followed a scent, walking up to it with her tail staying still. After a few moments, she leapt when she heard a faint rustling in the bush. "Gotcha, mouse-Moonpaw?"

Her sister looked astonished for a while, before bursting out into a fit of giggles. "You thought I was a mouse? Palepaw, first of all, you were louder than a twoleg monster, and I could literally feel your pawsteps. Second of all, you've known me for over six moons. I would've thought that you'd recognise my scent by now."

After her sister had finished laughing her head off - during which Palepaw was scowling maliciously at her - she scoffed. "Let's see *your* stalking technique, then."

Immediately Moonpaw shook her head. "I know what to do, but I can't do it," she meowed quietly, awkwardness creeping into her voice.

She then jumped up. "I could teach you, though!"

Palepaw considered it. On one paw, she wanted to catch her first piece of prey on her own, but on the other, without knowing the correct technique, she would never be able to properly catch it.

"Alright," she finally agreed, though she said it slightly reluctantly. She still wasn't happy about accepting the help, even if it was her sister, but in order to impress her mentor, she wanted to be able to catch the biggest mouse the Clan had ever seen!

"Right. Crouch, as low as you can, but without pressing your belly to the floor. No, not that low; the leaves will crinkle at your touch and alert prey. Yes, that's better. Well, I think it is."

Moonpaw's tone automatically became calmer as she helped her sister, and Palepaw noticed that she seemed more relaxed.

After a few more pointers, she and her sister set off again, Palepaw sliding through the undergrowth a lot easier now that she knew how to do it. She noticed another mouse- this one scrawny, but a mouse nonetheless- nibbling on a small seed. Instincts kicked in and she instantly pounced.

The mouse looked up a split second too late; Palepaw had dug her claws into its neck, killing it instantly.

"Not much on this... Thing." She muttered, disappointment etched on her face.

After a moment, she heard a faint, "mouse-dung!" From Moonpaw, and padded over with her catch to investigate.

The white apprentice was glaring at a small hole in the earth. "I hate mice," her sister declared, then turned to her.

When she caught sight of Palepaw waving the flimsy mouse around with a shaking paw, she scoffed. "Beginner's luck."

Sweetly, she replied, "Don't be silly. It was your wonderful teaching that taught me how to hunt."

With a roll of her eyes, Moonpaw began to walk back to Ashcloud. Empty-pawed.

With a shrug and a sigh, Palepaw began to retreat back to her own mentor with the small prey, carrying it between her jaws carefully.

Chapter 12

Palepaw hooked the mouse with a claw as she waved it at her mentor. "It's a bit small, but it... Uh... I suppose it could be tasty." She then added under her breath, "To a badger with no senses."

"Palepaw, you mustn't be so unappreciative of your prey. Say thank you- out loud quietly or in your head- for the prey." Sorrelspots' gaze was stern; she'd evidently heard her apprentice's disrespectful whisper and disliked it.

What a silly rule! Palepaw scoffed, wondering if the she-cat was messing with her. "To who? *StarClan?* And why?"

"You must give thanks to StarClan once you have caught something; it is thanks to them that you have been given the prey in the first place. To not thank them for your meals is like disowning your ancestors," Sorrelspots told her apprentice.

Palepaw was surprised; she would have never expected that Sorrelspots- kind, excitable, jumpy Sorrelspots- would act so fiercely towards her dead ancestors. Her mentor's tortoiseshell pelt was bristled, her blue eyes blazing with a fierceness that told Palepaw that everything she had just said had come from her heart.

She glanced down at her paws, shame instantly enveloping her senses. "Sorry," She muttered. "I'll say thanks next time."

"And all the times after that?"

"And all the times after that."

"Good. You'll get your chance to prove that to me now."

Palepaw's heart leapt. "Now? Really?"

Her mentor let out an enthusiastic purr. "Why not?"

The she-cat darted off immediately, bounding over the forest floor

with ease. *Beginners luck, Moonpaw said. I'll prove her wrong!*

She skidded to a halt in the middle of a clearing, scenting the air for prey.

Picking up a mouse's scent almost immediately, she began stalking it, paws lightly scaling the earth, her tail still as a branch, as it should be, hovering above the ground. *Perfect,* the thought, as she began to near the mouse. *I've got you now.*

She leapt, but her tail gently disturbed some crinkled leaves. The mouse saw her coming, scurrying away. Thankfully, Palepaw was faster- but whether it was desperation to finally prove she could be a warrior or actual skill, she couldn't tell. She landed on its back, hearing a sickening crack as its spine broke under her weight.

She made to pick it up, but then paused. *I have to say thank you!* She remembered suddenly. *But how? Can they read my mind? If so, uh, thanks.*

She hesitated, before laughing. "Nah. They aren't mind-readers, only ancestors." She then took a deep breath and yowled, "THANK YOU, STARCLAN!" at the top of her lungs. Birds immediately took off, and any other scents became faint. *I hope they can hear me now.*

She darted back to Sorrelspots with her mouse. "I said thanks this time," she seriously informed her mentor, who had an irritated- yet amused- expression on her face.

"Yeah. I heard." She suddenly burst out into a fit of giggles.

Palepaw began nervously chuckling. "Uh, what's so funny?"

The she-cat slowly stopped laughing. "You're supposed to give thanks quietly, not scream it to the rest of the world!"

Instant shame engulfed her. "Oops."

"Aw, it's alright. I should have made it clearer. It just means that we can't hunt anymore; all the prey will be shaking in their nests, cowering at the almighty Palepaw." Her eyes still bubbled with laughter, and she flicked her tail for her apprentice to follow her,

before leading her back to camp.

Though embarrassment still fluttered about in her chest, the young warrior's good temper was infectious. With a slight smile, Palepaw grasped her two pieces of prey in her jaws and followed her mentor back to camp.

~

"And then she screamed, 'Thank you, StarClan!' as loud as a monster! You could hear her from miles away!" Sorrelspots was speaking to Kestreltail and Hazelshade, who had been sharing tongues, about what had happened, and Palepaw sat beside her, gaze on her paws.

Hazelshade broke out into a purr. "So that's why crows began randomly swarming the skies!" She laughed softly, and Palepaw lifted her head to meet her grandmother's eyes, which sparkled with humour. "You are something, Palepaw," the older she-cat purred with a smile.

With a forced smile towards her, she got to her paws and began padding towards her nest, paws aching. "Goodnight, Palepaw!" Sorrelspots called after her, and, after flicking her tail in reply, she entered her den and curled up, eyes closing.

Almost instantly, she fell asleep.

Chapter 13

"Moonpaw! Guess what? Wake up, you big lump of fox dung!"

A paw prodded the white she-cat in the side multiple times. "Go away." She groaned, flattening her ears, but she couldn't block out the touch. After a few more moments, she sat up to face none other than her sister. *No surprise there.*

"I just heard from Ivypaw that Spottedrose is moving into the nursery!"

Immediately, Moonpaw sat up, eyes widening. "Already? She's only been a warrior for... anyway, that's cool! More queens means more apprentices! Well, not yet, but more expecting queens means more kits, which means more apprentices, more warriors and more ThunderClan!" She gave a small leap.

Then, realising that she was overreacting, she nodded calmly, sitting back down, brushing scraps of her bedding out of her pelt with a paw. "I mean, that's cool." She replaced her former words coolly.

Palepaw nodded, a grin breaking out across her features. "You don't need to tell me that twice. Come on, let's take a look!"

As Moonpaw padded outside, meows could be heard. "But I don't want to go into the nursery yet!" That was definitely Spottedrose. She clearly didn't want to become a queen just yet. "I want to hunt more!"

Thistleheart, who must've been her mate, kept nudging her over to the den where Pebblesplash sat, watching her two kits tumble around her paws with a warm affection. "You're expecting kits now! Please, Spottedrose. I don't want to lose you or the kits, so don't go out of the camp alone."

The tom's tone was pleading as he reasoned with his mate. Usually,

Spottedrose was quiet, but she seemed adamant about doing more as a warrior before she settled down in the nursery.

However, at the mention of losing her kits, she winced, then groaned, defeated. "I don't want to lose them either," she murmured softly, then, after receiving a swift lick on the cheek, she padded into the nursery with a sigh.

"I can't wait for the new kits to play with!" Palepaw meowed animatedly. Moonpaw couldn't help but agree. They would be able to play with Rosekit and Thornkit in a moon or so, yes, but the more the merrier.

Ashcloud chose that particular moment to stick his head in, making both she-cats jump. "Battle training!" He chirped merrily, then padded away to where Sorrelspots was.

Moonpaw's ears flattened, and she let out a groan. She did *not* want to train.

However, Palepaw quickly glanced at her, confusion in her amber gaze. "What was that for?" She asked.

Moonpaw shrugged. "Nothing. I'm just tired." She spoke too quickly, though; her sister narrowed her eyes at her, though said nothing.

The two she-cats left the den after a quick groom, following their mentors into the woods for the battle training.

~

"No, that's definitely not how you do it, Palepaw. Try again."

With a groan, Palepaw practised her badger attack for the fifth time, though once again, the moment she stepped out, she lost balance for a split-second, and her invisible opponent would have torn her to shreds had it been a real battle. Or so Ashcloud had said.

"It's hard lunging at thin air." She complained, earning a disapproving glare from Sorrelspots.

"You've got to imagine that there's a real badger there. What do you

do?"

"Run, maybe? They'd be pretty slow, since they're so fat." Palepaw let out a yawn, stretching it out to emphasise her boredom. "It's not like I'll ever meet a badger, so I don't see why I have to learn this stuff."

Sorrelspots suddenly lunged at her without warning, and Palepaw found herself being flipped onto her side. "I'm a badger." She snarled, arching her back. The black and ginger fur along her spine bristled just like Palepaw imagined a badger's to.

She darted back when a paw swiped her way, and she found herself imagining a massive white paw instead of Sorrelspots' small white one. After a split-second, Palepaw darted forward, rearing up quickly and lashing a forepaw down Sorrelspots' face. Sheathed, of course.

She then lunged underneath her mentor; being smaller than a badger, she would always have that advantage. She leapt on her mentor's back, pretending to rake her claws down with a triumphant yowl.

And completed the move perfectly.

She hopped off of her mentor's back, happiness fizzing from her pelt. "Nice work, Palepaw." Ashcloud nodded to her, while Sorrelspots purred.

She nodded with a purr of her own. "That was much easier with an actual 'badger'."

Ashcloud nodded. "Of course it was. And you shouldn't use a move like that with something like a fox because...?"

Palepaw thought. "It was quite an exposing move, so it would be bad for a faster animal. Right?"

"Correct." Ashcloud seemed impressed. Palepaw could've jumped for joy at his expression.

"Now it's your turn, Moonpaw." Ashcloud turned to Palepaw's sister,

who had been watching silently with a look of awe and dread on her face. "Remember what Palepaw just did, and try not to fall over with this move."

~

Moonpaw padded shakily up to Ashcloud. *I'll fail I'll fail I'll fail I'll-*

You're not going to fail. Moonpaw could barely stop herself from jumping at the voice in her head.

Just focus. It may come easier to your sister, but you will always beat her when it comes to precision.

Then, a shadowy she-cat stepped out of the darkness. Moonpaw was shocked to find nobody noticing her. *They cannot see me, Moonpaw.* The voice purred. Moonpaw watched as green eyes streaked with gold-yellow lines narrowed as the cat smiled.

I am a badger. Came the snarled reply. *You must attack me. Claws unsheathed; I can take it.* Again, another cruel smile.

Moonpaw found an uncharacteristic anger bubbling up inside of her. She didn't need any cat's help. She could do it on her own!

Good, the voice purred. *Now use that anger. Put it into your move.*

I don't need your help, stranger, she thought, glaring at where the she-cat stood. She took off, running like a river. When close enough, she reared up, slicing her claws down the dark she-cat.

Where her claws met fur, blood welled up, and she took a step back, eyes widening with horror.

The she-cat's meow was one of outrage. *Don't stop there! Finish the move!*

Moonpaw shook her head, and after an instant, the black shadow disappeared.

Next time, it snarled, *don't hold back.*

But Moonpaw barely heard the voice. She winced as she remembered the blood, slowly trickling down the she-cat's body.

She turned to her mentor, who looked as though she'd just insulted him. "Ashcloud..." She meowed quietly, shaking slightly. "I don't think I can do this." She sat down, head bowed in shame.

If she found it hard to injure a shadow, how would she ever fight in a battle?

Ashcloud looked her over carefully, eyes narrowed slightly. "Alright. Let's go back. We've done enough training for one day."

After shaking out his pelt, Ashcloud led the group back to the camp.

Chapter 14

Palepaw stared at her sister in open-mouthed shock.

Moonpaw had just stood there, then charged up to an invisible badger, slammed her forepaws down...

Then drew back, horror written on each of her features.

What could have possibly made her so scared? She thought, confusion lighting up her eyes.

She didn't get to find out, however, since her sister seemed to be deliberately ignoring her, padding ahead so she was walking next to her mentor. Palepaw could still see her shaking.

"Hey, Palepaw? You did great, by the way."

It was Sorrelspots, her voice filled with kindness, though as Palepaw turned her head to thank her she could see that her mentor was just as confused as she was.

The group kept a reasonable pace, though Ashcloud seemed to be stressing slightly, unusual for him. At one point, Palepaw heard him mutter quietly, "Would you hurry up already?"

When they reached camp, Ashcloud padded straight to Bumblestar's den, while Moonpaw scampered off to where Amberblaze and Sunflame were sharing tongues, urgently telling them something that Palepaw couldn't hear.

Instead, she just stared awkwardly around, seeing if she could spot her friends, but to no avail. *They must already be in their nests.*

"May all cats gather around the Highledge to hear my words!"

Palepaw jumped at the yowl; she thought he had been talking to Ashcloud. Her wandering gaze eventually found the tom, sitting with Honeywhisker but staring at Moonpaw. Palepaw thought she

detected sadness in his eyes.

She turned around and padded over to where Sorrelspots was sitting, settling beside her. She gave her apprentice a friendly nudge, which Palepaw kindly returned, before turning her attention to Bumblestar.

"As you know, the full-moon is tonight."

Palepaw turned her head to see many cats staring expectantly at their leader,
A few giving happy yowls. She narrowed her eyes in confusion, wracking her brains. *What's so special about that?*

"That means that I have to choose some cats to go to the gathering." *Oh, of course!* Palepaw remembered her father's tales of the gathering every full-moon, where the Clans would gather to discuss their news of that past moon.

Her heart beat nervously as she felt the gaze of the leader briefly fall upon her as he scanned the crowd of cats. *Where's Moonpaw?* She wondered, glancing around her to find her sister, but couldn't spot her.

Confused, she shrugged it off. *Moonpaw would never miss an opportunity like this though*, she thought worriedly.

No, she's probably just tired. She scolded herself for thinking otherwise.

But the other half of her couldn't help but worry. *Tired from what, though? She didn't do much training.*

She didn't have time to answer her own thoughts, however, as Bumblestar began to list names.

"Myself, of course, and Shrewfoot, Silverleaf and Whitepool, Kestreltail, Sorrelspots, Spottedrose, Goldenlight, Rowanfur, Tawnywing, Raventail, Amberblaze, Palepaw and Moonp..." The leader trailed off, looking for the white she-cat. Unable to find her, he shrugged. "Redfeather and Gingerheart."

Palepaw felt faint. "I'm going to the gathering?"

Chapter 15

"Isn't it exciting? Your first gathering!"

Amberblaze excitedly circled her kit, purring with happiness.

Palepaw flicked her tail, barely concealing her anticipation as she nodded eagerly at Sunflame, who looked like he was going to burst with pride.

She padded over to the group assembled for the gathering, closely followed by an overly eager Amberblaze. "Your first gathering!" She kept squealing, adding in excited random statements at completely random times.

She shuffled over to where Sorrelspots waited, giving her sleek tortoiseshell pelt a brisk groom. "Have you seen Moonpaw?" She asked her. She could hear the worry in her own voice.

After another quick stroke of her tongue down her pelt, Sorrelspots shook her head. "I haven't. Check the apprentice's den before you leave. She could be in there."

Palepaw nodded, before racing over to the den, paws barely skimming the earth. Was Moonpaw alright?

"Moonpaw?" She called her sister's name, her voice echoing throughout the den. She entered the shady den, blinking as she tried to adjust her eyes to the darkness.

Once her vision improved, she noticed Moonpaw curled up in her nest, asleep. She padded over, purring softly when she heard her sister sleep talking.

Satisfied that she was alright, Palepaw trotted out, heading over to Sorrelspots, who had finished grooming. "She's in there. She's just sleeping."

Her mentor gave a flick of her ear, before padding to her sister's

side, saying something to her.

Palepaw left her to chat and went back to where her mother was, talking to Raventail.

They were talking about different hunting techniques for some reason, though stopped when Palepaw padded over.

"Ready to go?" Amberblaze questioned her daughter. Once Palepaw nodded, Amberblaze began to say something else. She was interrupted quickly by Bumblestar's yowl, who, with a sweep of his thick tail, led the group of cats out.

Palepaw trailed behind the leader. On her left was her mother, and on her right, Sorrelspots. The warrior had nudged her way through the group to find her apprentice, and was chatting animatedly about the gathering.

Not that Palepaw was paying attention.

No, Palepaw was too busy imagining what it would be like meeting the other Clans. She could picture it now according to her mother's tales; stinky ShadowClan, with gigantic warriors the size of foxes covered in battle scars, with yellow fangs and eyes gleaming with hunger for blood. WindClan, so rude that they twisted all your words, even if a compliment, into an insult, with small warriors and smaller brains. And finally, RiverClan, too smart and nosy for their own good, always stinking of fish guts. She wrinkled her nose just picturing them.

Palepaw had been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't realised the group had joined up with another Clan. Scenting the air, she inhaled a foul odour that reminded her vaguely of rotting leaves.

That must be ShadowClan, she realised with a jolt, her pelt prickled with fear. Were there any fox-warriors among the group?

Glancing around, she thankfully realised that none of the cats looked too different, except for a large black tom with eyes that seemed to read her mind.

She shivered, glancing away from the menacing gaze. "Who's that?"

She asked Sorrelspots, ears flattening as she nodded to the tom.

At the sight of him, Sorrelspots shuddered. "That's Ratstone. He's horrible and a bully, so I wouldn't pick a fight with him."

Kestreltail leaned forward from behind them, joining in the conversation with a warning. "I wouldn't let anyone hear that if I were you. He's the deputy of ShadowClan."

Palepaw's eyes widened slightly as her mentor scoffed. "I don't give a rat's whisker about what he hears," She muttered, but she still quietened down as she added, "But he is really cruel."

Her eyes had a shadow in them, as if she'd experienced the deputy's cruelty firsthand.

Soon enough, they had reached the log. Palepaw's eyes widened. *That doesn't look safe!*

A ripple of excitement spread across the groups. Palepaw noticed a few apprentices nervously stepping back, but kind mentors nudged them forward with encouraging words.

For before them lay the tree-bridge, and beyond that, the gathering island.

Chapter 16

Palepaw was one of the last of the ThunderClan cats to cross.

In front of her was a small ShadowClan apprentice. He was a fluffy white tom with a short brown tail and piercing amber eyes that she saw every time he turned his gaze to the water below. Most of all, he was agonizingly slow, and Palepaw found herself getting annoyed.

"Hurry up," she muttered under her breath, and to her surprise the little tom did so, squeaking a "Sorry!"

He scampered across the tree trunk, his tail lashing. Palepaw couldn't tell whether he was annoyed, stressed or scared.

When Palepaw finally reached solid ground, she turned to the white apprentice.

She padded over to him, giving him a gentle nudge. "Hey, you okay? You look a little shaken up," she meowed cheerfully. "I'm Palepaw."

The white and brown apprentice jumped. "I-I'm Eaglepaw." The tom kept glancing from Palepaw to somewhere else, as if trying to look busy.

She rolled her eyes. "You know, this is my first gathering." She tried to sound friendly, but found it hard to when the tom seemed to be ignoring her. *How rude.*

She shrugged it off, attempting one last time. "Is it your first gathering?"

The tom turned to her, fixing piercing amber eyes on her. "Leave me alone."

He tried to walk away from her, huddling in the fur of a grey tabby tom, most likely his mentor.

The tom was amused, his amber gaze warm as he acknowledged Palepaw. "Eaglepaw, there's nothing to be afraid of. It's only a ThunderClan apprentice."

"*Only* a ThunderClan apprentice? Psh." Palepaw was not pleased at the title that the tom had given her.

The young apprentice didn't speak, only burrowing deeper into the tom's thick fur.

The warrior turned to her apologetically. "He's a bit timid. Ever since-" Eaglepaw gave him a nudge, peering up at the tom.

"I don't want *her* to know. She'll just be mean about it." The tom's tone was rude.

Palepaw's eyes widened. She'd known that ShadowClan were rude, but not *that* rude!

She glared at him. "Forget I even tried to be your friend," she muttered, padding back to Sorrelspots' side.

Her mentor was deep in conversation with Kestreltail and a pretty white she-cat with bright green eyes. A younger dark grey tom with blue eyes sat by the white she-cat's side.

"And then she yelled it out loud! It was the funniest- Oh, hello, Palepaw. I was just telling Lilytail how you thanked StarClan for your prey." Sorrelspots' cheerful voice calmed Palepaw, and she sat down beside her mentor.

"This is Lilytail, and this is Ripplepaw. You two are both apprentices, so you'll get along great."

One glance at the grey tom told her otherwise. He was looking at her with the gaze of a kittypet; rude, obnoxious, selfish and careless. "Hi, Palepaw," he meowed, dipping his head to her. She narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Hello," she returned the gesture, "Ripplepaw."

Sorrelspots nudged Palepaw over to the apprentice, much to her

dislike. "Go play. You'll have fun!"

Palepaw stared at her mentor incredulously. "Fun? *Fun?* A ShadowClan cat, fun?"

Her mentor sent her a disapproving glare. "Not all ShadowClan cats are bad." Again, a haunted look in her eyes, but quickly masked.

Palepaw shrugged. "This one might be," she muttered, but followed the tom.

They padded over to where a small, pale grey apprentice was sat, carefully touching her paw to the lake. "Echopaw?" Ripplepaw called gently. "Say hello to Palepaw."

The small apprentice turned around, her amber eyes shining with delight at the sight of Palepaw. "Hi! I'm Echopaw! Who are you? I mean, you're Palepaw? Are you from ThunderClan? I've never seen you before. You must be from ThunderClan. You are from ThunderClan, right? I mean, it's because I've never seen you before, and you smell like a ThunderClan cat, and you're probably an apprentice, which is great, because so are we! I have to ask, what is it like in ThunderClan? It it warm? I've heard that you eat foxes! Is that-"

The she-cat stopped babbling when Ripplepaw put his tail on her shoulder. "Aww, I did it again, didn't I?" She dropped her head sadly.

Palepaw burst out laughing. "I like you. You're interesting. But we don't eat foxes."

The grey apprentice's eyes widened. "Really? That means that Blizzardnose was lying... I thought he was! That means we can be friends! If you did eat foxes, I don't think I could have been your friend, but now I can! I mean, if you want to be friends. I don't know if you want to be friends because you haven't said it yet. So... do you want to be friends?"

Palepaw nodded, and she cheered. "Great! That means that-"

The chatty she-cat was broken off by a yowl. Palepaw raised her

head, spotting a skinny grey and white tom leading a patrol of warriors and apprentices, slowly followed by an elderly leader with her Clan.

Palepaw spotted two WindClan apprentices following their Clan down the slope and her spirits brightened. *Maybe they'll be my friends as well.*

She padded over, coming face to face with a white she-cat and a ginger she-cat. She noticed the similarities instantly; same build, same excited quivering, same fur length.

"Hi! I'm Palepaw," she meowed eagerly, tail flicking.

The white apprentice blinked, friendly welcome in her eyes. "I'm Lightpaw, and this is Poppypaw."

Palepaw nodded to each one of them. "Is this your first gathering?"

Lightpaw nodded while Poppypaw exclaimed, "I'm super excited!"

Just then Echopaw padded over, her pretty monotonous pelt fluffed up against the wind. "Bumblestar's just started the meeting, come on! I bet it's going to be great! This is my first gathering, actually, but..."

Tuning out of the wave of words, Palepaw followed the apprentice's sweeping tail as she led the other apprentices through the pine trees. Her heart accelerated when she saw the huge group of gathered cats.

"Don't worry," Echopaw purred to Palepaw. "You'll get used to it. At least, that's what Ripplepaw says. He's been to lots of gatherings! I think Flashstar likes him. He's so lucky!"

Palepaw slowly made her way down to where a grey RiverClan she-cat was noisily boasting to Ripplepaw, who sat next to Eaglepaw with his tail rested on this white tom's shoulders.

Slowly picking her way along the crowd of cats, she went to sit near them, Poppypaw and Lightpaw following. Echopaw padded over to Ripplepaw and the grey apprentice, instantly joining in with her

chatting.

Palepaw rolled her eyes, fluffing out her honey-golden pelt and waiting for the gathering to start.

Chapter 17

"ShadowClan is, as usual, thriving. Prey is well, and we welcome Eaglepaw as an apprentice of our Clan."

A healthy cheer spread around the four Clans, Palepaw included. She didn't much like the skittish apprentice, but he deserved a cheer. *Maybe it'll loosen him up a bit,* she thought with a soft snicker.

However, she noticed a few of the ShadowClan cats glaring up at their leader, tails twitching irritably. *What's wrong with Eaglepaw being an apprentice? He may look and act like a kit, but-*

Her trail of thought halted then, realisation dawning on her. What if Eaglepaw *was* younger than six moons? He certainly acted it, and his full coat of kit fur was most unusual for a six-moon old.

"Splashnose is heavy with kits and Amberfoot has recently moved to nursery." There was a gleam in Flashstar's yellow eyes as he mentioned the queens, but it was gone as quickly as it came. *That was weird,* Palepaw thought. *Is he the father of one of those she-cats' kits?* She glanced at Poppypaw to see if she'd noticed, but the ginger she-cat was staring on intently, her leaf-green eyes wide.

Palepaw listened to WindClan half-heartedly - as usual, prey was "running well" - and an elder, Rockeye, had died.

When Eveningstar began to speak about her Clan, Ripplepaw hummed, murmuring quietly to Eaglepaw, "She's so old I'm surprised she remembers how to talk. The *elders* of the Clan don't remember who her parents are." The small tom paused, then nodded, as if he were trying to gain approval from the larger tom.

Palepaw found the fur on the back of her neck rising. ShadowClan cats really didn't seem very nice.

"Shadeclaw has had two kits, Songkit and Glazekit." The frail leader slowly turned her head to Bumblestar. "Wavetail and Webfrost

drove a fox off our territory but it crossed straight into yours, I'm afraid."

The ThunderClan leader nodded kindly. "Thank you, Eveningstar. My warriors will keep their eyes and ears sharp."

As the RiverClan leader sat down again, Bumblestar spoke.

"ThunderClan welcomes two new warriors, Goldenlight and Spottedrose. Also, Palepaw and Moonpaw have become apprentices."

Palepaw felt every hair on her pelt rise as gazes turned her way. But she raised her head, proudly puffing out her chest.

Bumblestar continued. "Pebblesplash's kits are well, and Spottedrose has moved to the nursery. We expect new kits in a few moons. Let us pray that they are born into a world of happiness, not of bloodshed."

There were many murmurs of agreement from the throng of cats as Bumblestar stepped down, the majority of which being from ThunderClan.

Palepaw didn't miss when Flashstar cast a look of distaste towards the ThunderClan leader, nor how Ratstone's piercing eyes didn't leave his pale pelt.

With a lash of his tail, Flashstar allowed his voice to carry across the gathered assembly once more. "The gathering is over."

Then, the four leaders leapt down. She watched silently as Bumblestar padded over to Silverleaf and began hastily whispering to her. But her attention was stolen as Echopaw almost barrelled into her.

"Hey, can we sit together next gathering? You're very nice and I liked talking to you, and-" the she-cat broke off hastily. "I... Sorry. I tend to talk a lot."

Palepaw let out an amused purr. "Yeah. I can tell. But that's fine. You're probably the only nice ShadowClan cat I've met."

At that, Echopaw immediately glanced over to where her brother was, walking over to Flashstar with Eaglepaw. "Ripplepaw is just protective of Eaglepaw, that's all. You see, Eaglepaw's mother was... I mean, well, she died recently. It really shook him up. And then he was made an apprentice, and he was still young... Of course, I mean mentally young, not... He's not..." She trailed off from her hasty attempts to straighten her previous words out, looking at her paws desperately as if asking them to help her. "Anyway, Ripplepaw may make some rude remarks, but he actually really cares for us. Cats who are usually considered outcasts, I mean."

Is she an outcast to her Clan? Palepaw went to reply when Bumblestar called out to her. "Come on, Palepaw. Its time to go."

Her previous forlorn look dissipated quickly as she saw the twinkle in Bumblestar's eyes. "Coming!"

With a flick of her tail as a goodbye to Echopaw, she rushed after her Clan leader.

Chapter 18

"Faster, Moonpaw! Don't you want to win?"

Not really, Moonpaw thought irritatedly, trying to block out Ashcloud's cries of encouragement as she watched Palepaw's form in front of her, eyes narrowed as cool leaf-fall air hit her muzzle.

It had been almost a half-moon since the gathering. She and Palepaw were racing along a dusty strip of forest, and so far Moonpaw hadn't won a single race out of the seven they'd had. She just didn't have it in her to take the win away from Palepaw.

However, now she had a strong inkling that her sister was bored as she raced across the earth. *Isn't she enjoying winning?*

Moonpaw sighed. *If she doesn't like it, I may as well try*.

She suddenly put on a burst of speed, slowly but surely overtaking her sister. Eventually she was ahead by a few mouse-lengths.

When she reached the trees that marked the end of their training strip, she skidded to a halt, sitting down.

Palepaw raced over, followed by Ashcloud and Sorrelspots. All three stared at her with shock.

"Where did that come from?" Ashcloud asked, confusion etched on his grey face.

Moonpaw withdrew slightly. "Well, Palepaw wasn't enjoying the race any more, so I..." She shrugged. "Sorry..."

Palepaw scoffed. "'Sorry?' are you kidding me? That was amazing!" She padded over to her sister, gently nudging her flank with her tail.

Ashcloud's tail tip twitched irritably. *Oh... Now I've upset him*, she thought miserably. Any triumphance from making her sister happy

before was gone.

With a sigh, her mentor sat down. He wrapped his tail around her. As if sensing that he wanted to speak to the apprentice alone, Sorrelspots herded a protesting Palepaw away.

Ashcloud blinked slowly. "You know what I can't understand, Moonpaw?"

The white she-cat's eyes narrowed slightly. Her tail drummed nervously across the cool earth. She ignored the coating of dust that she received as she meowed, "What?"

Ashcloud's eyes closed again. "You have so much potential, but your heart isn't here."

With a nervous glance to her paws, she answered as honestly as she could. "What do you mean?"

A soft chuckle. Then: "Oh, come on, Moonpaw. You don't think we can't see that you don't enjoy this training? Everyone knows that you never wanted to be a warrior." *What?*

Her initial thought was, *how does he know?* She began to reply in a shaky voice, but trailed off, finding nothing to say. "I..."

Ashcloud smiled down at her, eyes narrowed faintly with humour. "You don't think I haven't seen the way you look at the medicine cat's den? How you watch Whitepool with such envy that you nearly burst? Yes, Moonpaw, we know. Well, maybe your dense father doesn't, but..."

Suddenly, Moonpaw felt a rush of annoyance. "So, why haven't you done anything about it? Or you could've told me sooner. Sunflame seems to hate the idea of me being a medicine cat."

Another kind smile. "Its not my decision to make, Moonpaw." Unspoken words ring in her ears. *It's yours.*

Moonpaw could almost hear the words. She got to her paws. "I just want to follow my dreams," she murmured softly. "But I ask myself, 'if it makes others feel bad, is it really worth it?' The answer is

always no. I hate to be the cause of pain."

Ashcloud stood suddenly. He turned so he was facing her, then said in a fierce voice, "Don't let anything shape your path for you, Moonpaw. You decide what will change your future, and only you."

A small flame sparked in Moonpaw's heart. "You're right. I'm sorry, Ashcloud. I really wish I could be your apprentice, and you're a great mentor. I guess I'm just too weak for warriorhood."

But Ashcloud was shaking his head. "No, Moonpaw. You're stronger than anyone I know. Who else would stand up to her whole Clan with a matter like this?"

Moonpaw dipped her head gratefully to Ashcloud, then turned tail and raced back to camp, hope coursing through her veins for the first time in a while.

Chapter 19

"You what?"

Sunflame's bewildered gaze bore down into Moonpaw's.

Paws trembling slightly, she repeated
What she'd just said. "I want to be a medicine cat."

Sunflame's fur couldn't bristle any more. Moonpaw knew she'd caught him at a bad time- he'd just been leaving on a border patrol with Wolfwhisker and Hazelshade when Moonpaw asked to talk, but Swanfeather had swooped in, taking his place- but the horror that radiated off of him made her want to cry out.

They now stood a few fox-lengths into ThunderClan's forest. Sunflame was frozen, while Moonpaw quivered gently.

After a moment, her father let out a long sigh. "Moonpaw, I... You're not safe as a medicine cat."

The words slipped out before she could stop them. "Oh, and I am as a warrior, fighting with tooth and claw rather than healing with herb and paw?"

She regretted the sharpness of her tone instantly, for Sunflame recoiled as if she'd attacked him. *How appropriate,* she thought bitterly.

But Sunflame shook his head gently. "There are some things, Moonpaw, that cannot be explained. I just..." He trailed off helplessly, realising suddenly that he'd never get his daughter to comply.

She sensed the half-lie before it was out of his mouth. "If you become a medicine cat, you'll never learn how to fight. Then you won't be able to protect yourself."

Moonpaw's fur bristled. Her father was being impossible again.

"Look, Sunflame. I love you, and I appreciate everything you do for me, even if I don't agree with it. But it is my choice which path I follow, not yours. It doesn't matter how "safe" I am, because at the end of the day, I'm still the same old Moonpaw living in the same old ThunderClan. If there were truly threats lurking out there, do you really think that a minor thing such as Clan rank would change that?"

Her father watched her silently for a moment, transfixed as his usually quiet, thoughtful daughter spoke out. This was probably the most she'd said in one day.

"Seriously?" He groaned. When Moonpaw didn't reply- she only looked on steadily at her father, sensing her win clearly- he hesitated, before nodding. "I can see that I'll lose this battle no matter what," he murmured softly, "but that doesn't mean I like it."

Moonpaw's tail twitched. "That doesn't sound like a reassuring answer to me," she grumbled.

"The answer is yes, for StarClan's sake!" He cried, the frustration evident in his voice, stance and movements.

Moonpaw's heart leapt out of its cage. "I can be a medicine cat?"

Sunflame nodded slowly. "As long as Silverleaf says that it's alright."

With a cry of excitement, she rubbed her cheek against a startled Sunflame's, before dashing back to camp.

~

Palepaw stared at her sister in shock. "I never knew that you wanted to be a medicine cat!"

Moonpaw nervously scraped at the ground with a paw. She'd decided to tell Palepaw before she asked to actually be one. "I was going to tell you... but I didn't want to. I didn't want you to be sad."

With a vigorous shake of her head, Palepaw scoffed. "Are you kidding me? That's awesome! I always thought that your heart wasn't into being a warrior, but I didn't think that you had eyes for

being a *medicine cat*!" Her whiskers quivered as she wrinkled her nose, as if the words she'd just said were crowfood.

Moonpaw nodded silently. "Yeah... I'm sorry that we can't train together though..." She glanced guiltily at her paws, eyes half-closed.

Then suddenly she brightened. "But you can tell me all about your battles when I'm healing your wounds!" She chirped excitedly.

With another wrinkle of her nose, Palepaw nodded reluctantly. "If you really want to touch those smelly herbs, go ahead."

With an amused purr, Moonpaw rolled her eyes. "I think I will, thanks."

She gave her sister an affectionate headbutt before getting up again.

With paws as heavy as boulders, she padded over to the medicine cat's den. She paused outside, worry sparking along her white pelt. She turned to her sister, who nodded her along encouragingly, then turned, padding into the shady den.

~

Who is your favourite character so far?

Chapter 20

The den was surprisingly well-lit for sun-high. Usually, the sun was at an angle that it just didn't reach the insides of the medicine cat's den, creating an uncomfortable darkness.

Moonpaw hadn't been in the den since she'd been made an apprentice; the atmosphere around her and the medicine cats had been tense ever since she'd denied wanting to be one.

Now, as she padded in, tension crept up her white pelt, giving her the impression that perhaps it wasn't a good idea to come.

Just as she was about to call out, a white figure trotted into the den, her tail erect. Yellow and purple flowers lay on her back in two piles. "Silverleaf? I-"

Whitepool broke off when she saw Moonpaw. "Are you alright, Moonpaw?" Her head tipped to one side, giving her a look of playfulness.

The white apprentice nodded slowly. "I... I was wondering if maybe..." She trailed off awkwardly, not knowing how to start the conversation.

"What is it, Moonpaw?" Silverleaf's voice echoed in the den, making both Whitepool and Moonpaw jump.

A moment after, a slim silver figure appeared, her eyes gleaming in the lit den. As if she couldn't cope with the sensation that she was drowning in guilt any longer, Moonpaw burst out suddenly, "I want to be a medicine cat!"

Shock lit Whitepool's features but Silverleaf merely nodded. "I know," she replied. "Any more pointless facts you feel like naming?"

Moonpaw felt exasperation crawl through her pelt. "I mean it. I don't want to- I can't- be a warrior. I'm sorry for lying. I just didn't

want to upset anyone."

Something shone in Silverleaf's eyes, something that Moonpaw couldn't quite detect, but a warm feeling spread through her pelt. "Very well," the silver and white tabby replied, nodding with the slightest curtness.

Moonpaw could have jumped for joy. "So I can be a medicine cat?"

"Yes, Moonpaw. I'll take you on as an apprentice."

Her heart skipped a beat. It was all that she could do to stay on the ground. "Thank you." She was surprised at the calmness in her voice.

Then, Silverleaf padded out of the den. "I'll ask Bumblestar to do the ceremony," she explained as she passed.

She watched silently as Whitepool began to quietly place the herbs onto piles, sweeping old herbs away as she organised them. Transfixed, she watched her do this until she realised that Silverleaf had returned and was calling her name.

"Honestly, anyone would think you were deaf!" The older she-cat exclaimed with just the slightest tinge of annoyance, but when Moonpaw turned, she saw a hint of affection in her eyes.

Silverleaf gently shoved her in the direction of the den's entrance. "Go on, Moonpaw. Your ceremony will be held at sundown, which is sooner than you may think. You might want to tell your friends."

She didn't need to be told twice. With a purr louder than a twoleg's scream, she raced off, straight to her mother, who was talking with Willowpetal.

"... Not sure, Willowpetal. I don't think she's *that*- oh, hello, Moonpaw!" Amberblaze's short tail flicked in greeting. "What is it?"

With a nervous glance towards Willowpetal, whose gaze had turned sour at the sight of the apprentice, Moonpaw told her mother of what had happened that day. Slowly, Amberblaze's expression turned from one of confusion to one of shock, then eventually pride.

"My daughter, a medicine cat!" The black and ginger she-cat's eyes narrowed with happiness as she purred, drawing her kit closer for grooming.

With a quiet scoff, Willowpetal padded away. Moonpaw was too excited to pay attention to the sour look on the rude she-cat's face.

As Amberblaze groomed her, she calmed down, the rythmic strokes of the she-cat's tongue soothing the jumpy apprentice to the point of relaxation.

She started when Amberblaze gently nudged her shoulder, realising suddenly that her eyes had been drifting shut.

"Bumblestar just called the Clan together," she purred in amusement.

Embarrassed, Moonpaw ducked her head. Amberblaze gently smoothed down a stray tuft of fur. "I'm so proud of you. You're no shy little kit any more. Well, most of the time."

With one last purr, Amberblaze nudged her kit in the direction of the meeting, following along behind her.

As Moonpaw saw the gathered Clan, her nerves fluttered, like a rabbit had darted through a field of butterflies and sent them scattering. What if they didn't accept her as a medicine cat?

Willowpetal wasn't the only cat who seemed to dislike Moonpaw and her family. Raventail, despite being Amberblaze's father, seemed to loathe Sunflame. The two senior warrior brothers, Oakfur and Toadfur, didn't like Sunflame or his kits, and Oakfur had mentored Heathermist, Sunflame's dead sister. Also, Thistlepaw, Goldenlight, Spottedrose and Honeywhisker all seemed to have something against the two sisters.

Again, Moonpaw started. She'd been so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn't realised that the attention had turned to her.

Fortunately, Bumblestar hadn't gotten too far into the ceremony. "...Is it your wish to become a medicine cat apprentice?"

Though nobody could tell that she hadn't been listening, she still felt embarrassed. "It is."

Silverleaf spoke up. "Then at the half-moon, in two days, you must travel to the moonpool to be accepted by StarClan in front of the other medicine cats."

The pale tom nodded, smiling kindly down at the white she-cat. "The good wishes of all the Clan go with you."

Moonpaw held her breath. For a brief moment, there was silence. *If my Clan don't accept me, will StarClan?*

But then, Palepaw began to cheer, closely followed by Amberblaze, then a reluctant Sunflame. Ashcloud and Whitepool were next, soon followed by the majority of the Clan.

Only Thistlepaw didn't cheer; he sat with Pebblesplash's other kits, glaring at Moonpaw. At one point, their gazes met, and a frightful shiver ran up her spine.

But Moonpaw's mood didn't change. Excitement and happiness coursed through her blood, and she barely heard anything over the cheering as Silverleaf touched noses with her, then led her into the medicine cat's den.

Chapter 21

It was moon-high, but once again, Moonpaw couldn't sleep.

The apprentice had fallen asleep early, having spent the rest of the day learning basic herbs. She could only just remember them now; catmint, marigold, horsetail, chervil, dock, borage... Their uses would come later, and Moonpaw was grateful; recognising them from scent and sight alone was already tiring.

Silverleaf had set out the six herbs and performed various memory excersises that pushed Moonpaw to the very threshold of her abilities. If Moonpaw had been told that she had white fur and yellow eyes, she would've panicked and been unable to cope with the information she'd had to take in that day.

Moonpaw padded silently outside the apprentice's den, maneuvering carefully around a snoring Palepaw. She made sure that she wasn't disturbing anyone, but couldn't quite shake off the feeling that something- no, some*one,* she corrected nervously- was watching her.

She shook out her pelt when she was outside of the den, peering around.

The camp looked different when bathed in the moon's gaze. Almost beautiful.

Bumblestar's rock shone like molten silver in the pale light. The bramble barrier around the camp let in light only where gaps were, between the thorny tendrils of bramble, making the camp's light look like shattered ice. *Or a shattered moon,* Moonpaw realised. She looked at the camp through new eyes, a strange dream from before plaguing her thoughts.

"What are you doing up this late, Moonpaw?" Moonpaw jumped, spinning around. It was Sunflame's voice.

She shuffled over a bit to make room for her father, who sat neatly beside her. "Couldn't sleep," she murmured softly. Then she instantly fired back, "What are you doing up this late?"

Instantly her father looked a bit uncomfortable. "I couldn't sleep." He curled his tail around his daughter. "I never sleep well when I can hear pawsteps outside; I'm always waiting for a non-existent battle yowl."

Moonpaw shivered suddenly. She hated the idea of battle. Always had.

Awkwardly she sat there, not knowing quite what to do; it was only a few hours ago when she persuaded him to let her be a medicine cat apprentice, and she knew that he strongly disliked that idea.

Then, a sudden inquisitivity nagged at her, stubbornly clinging to her mind until she was forced to ask, "Why don't you want me to be a medicine cat? I get that you don't want me to be without battle moves and training, but I feel like there is more to that. Medicine cats recieve basic training, after all."

Sunflame seemed to tense, as if a great presence had settled upon him. But then he smiled. "Moonpaw, a father's instinct is to protect their kin, isn't it? If I knew something could potentially harm you, why wouldn't I do everything in my power to stop that?"

Her father looked down at her warmly. "I never thought that I would love anyone as much as I love you, Palepaw and your mother. I can't help but want to keep you locked away from everything."

With a quick shake of his head, he turned his gaze to the camp. "It looks like broken ice," he noted, blinking at the almost strangeness of the sight; the moon's pale glow transformed the cool, dusty-brown earth into perfect, opaque sediments of light. Moonpaw couldn't help but agree; she had never actually seen ice, but from her mother's descriptions it seemed familiar. In fact, she had thought so herself earlier.

Moonpaw felt the urge to fill the almost uncomfortable silence. Her

tail flicked nervously back and forth as she prepared to speak, but was instead cut off by a question.

"Moonpaw, are you happy?"

She was shocked at the sudden question, but answered honestly and quickly. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Her father nodded silently, watching her with his gold-amber flecked eyes. Through the intensity of the gaze, she noted sub-consciously that there was a dark rim around those amber infernos, much like charcoal remaining once the raging heat of a forest fire had dissipated.

"If you weren't happy, you know I'd do almost anything to make you happy, don't you." She nodded silently, but still said nothing.

After a while longer, Sunflame nodded. Moonpaw had looked away, but she could've betted that his warm gaze darkened somewhat.

Without another word, Sunflame got to his paws and padded into the warriors' den. She could hear a nest rustling as he supposedly climbed in. A few minutes later snoring echoed from the den, snoring that she recognised as her father's.

"At least he's asleep," she murmured to herself, looking almost enviously at the den where her father had disappeared into.

With one last sigh, she returned to her den, laying down in her nest.

It was a while before she finally found her way to sleep, and by the time that had happened, it was just an hour off dawn.

Chapter 22

As the sun peeped curiously over the dark horizon, Palepaw's blue-grey eyes opened.

It had been a day since Moonpaw's sudden change of role. The day before had been insufferably boring without her sister. As fun as her mentor was, she just wasn't Moonpaw, and Palepaw didn't think that she'd be able to get on with her quite as well.

With a quick yawn, the golden she-cat heaved herself to her paws. She blinked slowly, and, despite the lack of light, allowed her eyes to adjust to the dawn's dim rays.

After gently moving her sister's fluffy white tail from her path, she left the den, sitting outside to groom her pelt.

Leaf-fall seemed to have tugged along with it the dark clouds of storms, as the essence of it was written in the breeze; not only did the air smell of it, but the faintest sprinkle of rain coursed through as well, littering the golden apprentice's face with miniscule beads of water.

Palepaw cast one last glance towards the apprentices' den before setting to the task of grooming her pelt with long, smooth strokes of her tongue. However, she was interrupted mid-stroke when a small bundle of fur hit her flank, making her jump and land on a moist patch of earth.

She let out a small groan. "I was just grooming myself, and now I'll have to clean my paws again."

She turned to accuse whoever had done it, but found herself staring into the shocked eyes of Rosekit.

"S-sorry, Palepaw!" The small tortoiseshell squeaked, dipping her head. Her pretty fur bristled, and her tail was tucked nervously between her legs. *Does she think I'm going to hit her or something?* She

thought with an inward scoff.

"Its fine," she reassured the timid kit, who scampered away without another word. Palepaw found her eyes following the small kit's retreating form, until the little tortoiseshell entered the nursery.

Then, she found herself averting her eyes to the kit's brother, who was staring at her in an almost icy way with his stone-faced glare.

With a small jolt of slight confusion, she realised that the young tom's gaze unnerved her. It made her feel uncomfortable, as if those grey eyes were actually spheres of thunder.

With a quick shake of her head, she turned back towards the apprentices' den, but found herself face to face with a bristling Thistlepaw.

"Watch where you're going!" He spat, eyes dark. Where Thornkit's grey eyes ruffled her pelt, Thistlepaw's infuriated her. Why did he get to be so rude?

"I wasn't going anywhere, mouse-brain," she retorted back, the tip of her tail twitching as she turned away. She could feel a harsh glare upon her back- and not just because the sun had just risen high enough to light up the camp.

She sat down once again to finish grooming her paws, suppressing the urge to fidget under the heavy gaze.

Once the mud that she'd just acquired was all but gone, she rose once more, scanning the clearing for a familiar tortoiseshell pelt. Unfortunately, Palepaw's mentor was nowhere to be seen; asleep still, most likely.

With a huff, Palepaw went to sit down again, this time near the edge of the clearing rather than in front of the apprentices' den to wait for her mentor, but once again she was interrupted by someone. "Morning, Palepaw."

"Morning, Moonpaw." She didn't even need to look her sister's way to know who had spoken.

The white she-cat sat beside her sister, and Palepaw stole a glance at her to see her wrapping her tail around herself, evidently cold.

With a little smile, she shuffled up. "So, what's the greatest medicine cat in existence doing today?"

Moonpaw's ears pricked. "Treating the elders. Redfeather has a cough- not greencough, thankfully- and Silverleaf wanted to show me how to treat it. 'Better learning on the job than just listening to some she-cat droning on', or something along those lines."

Palepaw couldn't help but smile. Though what Moonpaw had said sounded like the most boring thing in existence- perhaps even more boring than the elders themselves- her sister seemed to be looking forward to it; her yellow eyes had lit up at the mention of learning, and the prick of her ears did nothing to dissuade her evident excitement.

She blinked in surprise as her sister suddenly jumped up. "And tonight I'm going to the Moonpool!"

Moonpaw shifted her gaze to her sister then. "So what are you doing today?"

Palepaw's tail tip twitched, revealing her slight irritation. "If Sorrelspots would just wake up already, then I might-"

"I'm here!" She heard the call from her mentor and jumped up, just in time to see the sleek mottled pelt of her mentor emerge from the warriors' den.

Palepaw waved her goodbyes to Moonpaw before padding to her mentor, who shook her fur, before sitting to groom. "So, what are we doing today?" She asked eagerly, bouncing on her paws.

Sorrelspots blinked warmly at her apprentice, pausing to say, "Border patrol, then hunting," before returning to her pelt.

Palepaw let out a little cheer, tail lashing suddenly as if to say, "yes!"

Once Sorrelspots' fur was clean and mess-free, she led Palepaw over

to where a small patrol was gathered; Wolfwhisker, Hazelshade and... *Thistlepaw*.

Palepaw could barely hide her disappointment. This was *not* going to be the fun day she'd had in mind.

Chapter 23

Moonpaw could barely hide her excitement.

After all this time, after weeks of wishing for the moment to come, never really hoping or longing, she was finally seeing the Moonpool.

It had been a half-moon since her sister had attended her first gathering. Moonpaw had yet to see a cat from another Clan, so the medicine cats would be the first outsiders to her life. She could hardly believe that they even existed; she'd only heard stories from the elders, her mother and her sister, and they all seemed to enjoy exaggerating things.

"Moonpaw! Hurry up! If we don't leave now, we will miss moon-high!"

She was shaken out of her thoughts by Silverleaf, who was leading her out of the forest, Whitepool at her side.

With a jolt, she realised that she'd fallen behind somewhat, and she sped up, matching her pace to the older she-cats with slight effort.

The three walked in silence for a while, before Moonpaw worked up the courage to ask Whitepool, "What are the other medicine cats like?"

The white she-cat replied with, "they're all so different. All the Clans actually have two medicine cats as of now, which is great. It means-"

"-that something bad is going to happen," Silverleaf cut in, expression stony. "The Clans have never lived so prosperously in their entire existence. The rogues are no longer a threat- after Goldensun left with Ivyfrost and Breezestorm, they haven't been even scented- and we haven't seen many foxes or badgers. Don't get me started on ShadowClan. They're *all* awful. Besides, Nightshade

survived that battle in the forest. I don't doubt for one moment that she hasn't given up. She's out there, biding her time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to rise. Then, she'll strike."

Moonpaw was about to say that she didn't know about these "rogues" or who Nightshade was when Whitepool interrupted. "Didn't Shade die in that battle with the Dark Forest?"

Silverleaf nodded. "No body was found, but the rogues claimed that their leader was dead. They didn't seem to be lying."

Moonpaw's head was spinning. Suddenly she couldn't take it. "What rogues? Who's Shade? Who's Nightshade? Who's Screech?"

Silverleaf's breath caught. "Of course. You weren't told about our recent past, were you? Only the legends from long before. Basically, a few seasons before you were born, there was a fight between a group of Dark Forest warriors and the Clans. Your grandfather, Goldensun, supposedly turned good - he was evil - and convinced rogues formerly against the Clans to fight with them. Their leader, Shade, is dead. The Dark Forest was predominantly led by a cat named Screech. Sunflame killed her, however, and her good-for-nothing daughter has most likely assumed the leader position."

Though Moonpaw was still confused, she nodded. "I think I've gotten the gist of it. But what is the dark forest?"

Before Silverleaf could reply, WindClan territory appeared, and with it, a lean, slightly skinny cat nosing at a clump of purple flowers.

"Beechbark!" Whitepool called, and the cat raised his head.

Moonpaw could see that he was a creamy-brown tom, though one of his paws was a slightly darker brown. He seemed young, though it might have been his size- he was smaller than Whitepool, who herself was on the smaller side. He had a narrow muzzle, and though his green eyes gleamed, it was with warmth rather than anything else.

"Greetings, Whitepool, Silverleaf. You're looking well. And- who's

this?"

The tom's tone was friendly, and he seemed to give off an aura of cheerfulness, but Moonpaw was still slightly nervous. "This is Moonpaw," Silverleaf announced. "She's going to be training as a medicine cat from now on."

Beechbark blinked warmly at her. "Welcome to the club," he murmured.

She dipped her head a little awkwardly, sticking to Silverleaf's side as the tom joined Whitepool as they began to make their way up a gentle slope. At the top, Moonpaw could just see the tips of rocks, marking the end of their journey; the Moonpool.

Moonpaw could barely remember to breathe. This was it. This was the moment she'd been anticipating for so long.

"Is Oatwhisker not coming? He wasn't here last time." Moonpaw was awoken from a state of awe by Whitepool, concern threaded through her voice as the asked the WindClan tom.

Genuine worry laced Beechbark's mew as he replied. "No. He's starting to worry me. He keeps saying that he's too old for everything. His chest only gets worse, and I fear for him."

After a murmur of sympathy from Whitepool, the group stopped. With a jolt of surprise, Moonpaw realised that they had already reached the top of the hill.

As soon as her gaze rested upon the scenery, Moonpaw let out a breath of surprise. "Oh..."

The sight before her was so beautiful that Moonpaw thought she might faint.

~

Who is your least favourite character so far?

Chapter 24

The Moonpool was truly breathtaking.

Rocks split the sky into sections, their peaks looming up to almost four times Moonpaw's height- and though she wasn't particularly large, they still seemed to tower above all of them. Their sides were crumbled, revealing that the area had once been encircled with a wall of stone long ago.

Trees stood beyond the area, birch and oak and sycamore and more that she couldn't name. They stood tall and sturdy, their leaves a vibrant green even in the moonlight.

The half-moon itself seemed to pulse brightly, reminding Moonpaw of the sun, despite it being night- while night, it was unusually light, and warm for leaf-fall. Moonpaw didn't know whether it was the pool of water before her causing this or not; it hadn't seemed particularly bright as the patrol of medicine cats had made its way along the serene terrain. Then again, she hadn't really been looking.

Last but not least was the Moonpool itself.

Moonpaw could hardly believe that such a magnificent place truly existed in the waking world. It shimmered and gleamed like a minnow's sleek scales, though at the same time seemed clearer than the bluest skies. The occasional caress from a breeze's tickling touch sent silent shudders through it, but it stilled effortlessly every time, returning to its flawless state of ice-like calmness.

Her previous thoughts that the Moonpool wasn't overly impressive were all but gone now- the feeling that she felt now exceeded anything she'd ever witnessed before. It was like she belonged there. She could practically hear the welcoming murmurs of her ancestors, encouraging her to approach the Moonpool, to bask in the majestic aura it emitted.

Seeing her awestruck gaze, Silverleaf chuckled. "What do you

think? Not some shabby RiverClan puddle, is it?"

"Hey!"

Moonpaw jumped at the new voice. It was a young she-cat with a sleek grey pelt and eyes like ice. Her tail tip flicked irritably. "RiverClan fishes in rivers. And they aren't shabby!"

A tom next to her sighed. He was a ginger tabby, and though his gestures suggested otherwise, his green eyes shone with affection. "Don't mind Ashenpaw. She's actually quite good at her job, despite having the arrogance of a young ThunderClan warrior." He spoke the last few words with a smug glance towards Silverleaf, who scoffed.

The way that the grey she-cat's eyes lit up after her mentor's words made Moonpaw think of melting water- they went straight from shards of jagged ice to bubbling springs of pride. "And don't you forget it!" She purred, head tilting upwards slightly, seemingly unaware that his words had been as much criticism as they were a compliment.

When the elder cat gave his apprentice a gentle nudge, Moonpaw noticed something. Though she'd initially thought that his fourth leg must have been hidden by his tail, when he moved it, she realised that it was not the case.

She suddenly gasped aloud as his tail rose up, revealing a complete absence of a leg. All eyes turned to her, and she felt a wave of embarrassment crash over her. "Sorry, um... But your... I didn't notice that you... I'm sorry."

After a few moments of staring at her in confusion, the tom erupted into a wheezy laugh. "You mean my leg? Or, rather, my lack of one?" He turned around so she could see his other side properly.

Moonpaw observed that he had a small stump where his hind left leg should be. His hip was intact and pain-free, as he demonstrated when he moved it slightly her to see, and there was no evidence of a wound.

"On my first day as an apprentice, I was hit by a twoleg monster," he explained. Moonpaw could barely suppress a shiver. Amberblaze's stories of the giant, thundering beasts that roared as they sped along the Thunderpaths that reeked of their breaths had not been merciful. "I was lucky; the twoleg found me and bought me to a medicine den for kittypets. It smelled awful but they patched me right up. The first time I was allowed to walk, around five moons later as I am told, I escaped."

She stared in awe at the tom. How had he managed to survive being with twolegs for so long? And with only three legs, how had he gotten away from them?

An awkward cough disrupted her thoughts. It was the ginger tom again. She broke her gaze quickly away, forcing her fur to lay back to hide the embarrassment that battered her mind. *Well done, Moonpaw. Now he probably thinks that you're a total stalker-weirdo.*

"Oh, shut up," she snapped quietly at herself, not realising that she'd spoken out loud until she saw Silverleaf stutter. She had evidently been mid-speech, saying something teasingly about her apprentice, when interrupted.

She dropped her head in apology, embarrassment scorching her ears off. "Sorry, I was talking... To myself..." She trailed off mid-sentence, murmuring the last two words a bit quieter.

Great. If he didn't already think she was weird, he did now. She awaited the teasing, but it never came- only a genuine laugh. "You know, Moonpaw, I think I like you," huffed the three-legged tom, eyes shining.

Silverleaf seemed less amused. "Can we begin yet?" She snapped, tail gently thrumming against the ground. "Or did you forget that gossiping is for elders?"

With an amused chuckle, the tom shook his head at her. "Just because ThunderClan's medicine cats are young and beautiful doesn't mean we all are. Take me, for example."

He shook his head. "Anyway, we have to wait for ShadowClan.

They usually come with us earlier, but Tansyfrost said that she'd have to come a bit later- a few cats are sick, or something."

"Lostleg, she said that some swamps were infected, and cats got sick from eating the frogs from it," Ashenpaw piped up helpfully, earning a mere nod from her mentor- Lostleg, it seemed. That seemed to satisfy her, for Moonpaw saw her eyes light up again.

Then she realised the possible weight of the situation. ShadowClan's main source of prey, poisoned? "Is there anything we can do to help?" She offered nervously, hesitant to speak up to the more experienced cats.

At almost exactly the same time- and a little too quickly- Silverleaf and Lostleg shook their heads. "It's best to leave their affairs to them," Silverleaf hurriedly explained, while Lostleg grunted in agreement. Apart from the awkward shuffling of paws from Beechbark, it was quiet after that.

What's going on? Moonpaw wondered, giving Lostleg's apprentice a quizzical glance. Ashenpaw seemed just as confused as Moonpaw felt- she returned the look with a shrug and a mouthed, "no idea". However, a swift glare from the grey she-cat's mentor closed her up, and she ducked her head in embarrassment and apology. Moonpaw, however, couldn't help but turn her gaze to Whitepool, who was watching the Moonpool with an unreadable expression.

Whitepool's ears pricked suddenly. Her head turned to where they had just come from. Moonpaw followed her gaze just in time to see a pair of golden ears appearing, soon followed by a head with bright emerald eyes. "Hello!" Came a cheerful voice, before the rest of a she-cat's body climbed the small remainder of the hill.

Moonpaw guessed that this was Tansyfrost; almost as soon as she padded into the area, the scent of ShadowClan wafted over- but it wasn't particularly disgusting, like the elders had said. It was actually rather pleasant- pine trees and mud, with a soft hint of rain. However, there was also a hint of something else. Her instincts told her that it was sickness, and she wrinkled her nose.

Tansyfrost herself was a pretty she-cat, with thick golden fur

covering her her lithe frame. Her eyes only added to her beauty- they were as green as any oak leaf had been last moon, before leaf-fall had settled into the lake, and certainly warmer.

"Finally, we can start," Silverleaf muttered, making no haste to skip the 'elder gossip' she could see approaching.

Every cat but Moonpaw seemed to watch Tansyfrost with a careful eye, as if they expected her to explode, but the golden she-cat merely nodded wearily. Her eyes quickly landed on Moonpaw, however, and she let out a squeak. "Oh! Hello! I definitely haven't seen you before, but you... Remind me of someone..." She tilted her head momentarily, before shrugging. "Can't remember. Probably not important. Anyway, I'm guessing you're new as a medicine cat. Don't worry about whatever anyone's told you- it's super fun! Maybe not when half the Clan and even your mentor are sick, but..." Again, she trailed off, but instead of trying to remember she seemed to be trying to forget.

Silverleaf butted in before anything else could happen. "Well, apologies for your problems. This is Moonpaw, and she's my apprentice. Let's just get this over with, please."

Tansyfrost laughed, but it seemed a bit forced. "Thank you. Moonpaw's a fitting name. And sure! Let's do this!"

The group of cats padded over to the pool. Most sat down, but both Silverleaf and Whitepool stayed on their paws. Moonpaw wondered why as she went to take a place, but then paused. *The ceremony! How could I forget?*

"Moonpaw, is it your wish to enter the mysteries of StarClan as a medicine cat?"

The words sent a chill down Moonpaw's spine. Silverleaf spoke calmly, as if she'd done it before. Moonpaw supposed she had with Whitepool, and had probably seen at least three, not including her own.

She swallowed nervously, recalling the ceremony that Whitepool had recited to her sometime in the previous two days. "It is." It had

come out a bit nervously, but it wasn't as if she could help it. Of course she *wanted* to be a medicine cat, but would she be accepted? She'd denied that fact for too long, and it had almost been too late when she had finally gotten her feelings out. Would StarClan forgive her for lying, and about their own messengers to the Clan at that?

"Then come forward." Silverleaf either didn't notice or didn't care that her new apprentice was quivering inside like a leaf in a windy clearing.

She spoke a little louder this time, her clear, smooth voice sliding across the cool air. "Warriors of StarClan, I present you with this apprentice. She has chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant her your wisdom and insight so that she may understand your ways and heal her Clan in accordance with your will."

The words sounded formal and she didn't know what half of it had meant. On top of that, she had barely heard them over the nervousness rushing in her ears. However, she had no time to ponder that as she was nosed to a spot in the crowd of cats.

As she lay down, she couldn't help but feel last-minute butterflies. Maybe she shouldn't be a medicine cat. Maybe she should just keep on the unsteady path of a warrior. Following her own wants was selfish, wasn't it? Sunflame didn't want her to be a medicine cat. Maybe she-

No, Moonpaw, she heard a voice in her head, warm and soothing. *You're meant to be here.*

I sure hope you're right, she thought right back, before doing the same as the other medicine cats and touching the Moonpool with her nose.

As soon as the cool liquid lapped over her muzzle, she felt a sensation quite like falling, and quickly found herself being tugged into darkness.

Chapter 25

Moonpaw waited for the moment that she'd stop falling through the darkness.

But it didn't come.

What? What is going on? Did StarClan reject me? Am I plummeting to my death? Fear gripped at her sides. *Even if I'm not worthy of being a medicine cat, would they really kill me because of it?*

A laugh in her mind woke Moonpaw out of her confused state, slicing through the tornado of darkness like a warrior's claws. It didn't quite destroy the terror that had her frozen in its clutches, however.

Yes*, Moonpaw.* The voice startled her, only making her more nervous than before. *They would. The StarClan that I know are unforgiving and cold, nothing like the image that you and your Clanmates have given them.*

"Who are you? Where are you?" She called as soon as she'd found her voice. However, all she received for a moment was another piercing laugh.

Do you wish that I come to you? I will take you somewhere where you will be safer. The voice made Moonpaw jump. Then, amidst the darkness, she saw a light. No, two lights. Green lights, the colour of holly. *Eyes.*

"Yes! Please, help me! Get me out of here!" She didn't care where she went, or who with, as long as she escaped the darkness that could supposedly kill her. It seemed to spin around her, and she could see nothing but those burning green flames in the distance.

For a time, it seemed as though the other cat- or, at least, she hoped it was a cat- had ignored her. In fact, the darkness seemed to only coil tighter around her, a snake not quite ready to let go of its half-

dead prey.

And then, suddenly...

It all stopped.

The ground, a rich and dark brown, suddenly became visible to her. As soon as she saw her paws touching it, she fell to it. *I never want to get up again,* She thought. Relief ached in all her muscles as she dug her claws into the cool earth that seemed to draw her in.

It was only then that she noticed the stench.

Though Moonpaw herself had never smelled crowfood before, she guessed that this was what it was like, but not nearly as bad. It almost overwhelmed Moonpaw, attempting to swallow her whole. However, it was better than the suffocating darkness she had just left, so she tried her best to ignore it.

She glanced around. It was dark- almost unbearably so- and when Moonpaw looked to the sky to seek the moon, she found that it was also dark- a deep, almost abrupt black- and though it was clear, no stars adorned it. *A cloudless night sky without stars? What kind of a place is this?*

But the night sky could hardly be called so. It didn't have the feel of outside- it was stuffy, and reeked of everything Moonpaw was afraid of. It was more like a large disc of darkness enclosing the place than a sky; there seemed to be no depth, and other than the shaded figure of the moon's dark side, there was no evidence of it being so.

"Do you like it?"

The voice startled Moonpaw so much that she nearly leapt in the air. It was feminine, and while slightly melodic, the end of the sentence seemed to slip into a noise quite like a growl.

She turned to the side, a cautious chill flowing through her veins. Those holly-green eyes were staring at her again, this time from the shadows of a large, gnarled tree's dead roots. Now that she could see clearer, she noticed the thin yellow streaks through them, like

cracks in dry earth. Moonpaw could just about make out the shape of a body, with sleek fur and a narrow frame.

Seeing Moonpaw squinting at her, the she-cat padded out of the shade. Moonpaw was shocked to find the cruelly-voiced she-cat surprisingly pretty, with luscious, short black fur that had a glossy sheen to it that made it seem almost grey, and a slim build, not without evident muscles. Scars faintly laced her body and face, but rather than making her sinister, they gave her the aura of a cat who had spent moons protecting their Clan.

Then, recognition hit her like a paw slamming down on prey. "You were there... You tried to teach me those battle moves." She remembered the dark cat that had been with her the day they'd been learning to fight badgers. Remembered the harshness of the voice that commanded her to attack. Remembered the blood.

She took a step back. "Wh- who are you?" Moonpaw asked, her voice shaking with nervousness. Though the cat didn't appear dangerous, she knew better than many that looks could be deceiving.

The cat smiled. However, there was something wrong about it, something off-putting. It seemed as if she was forcing it for Moonpaw, yet it was genuine at the same time. Like she was smiling at something else entirely, not without pain or passion.

Before the stranger could open her jaws to answer, another voice called out, smooth and clear. "Moonpaw! Step away from that cat."

Immediately all warmth left the black cat as her claws unsheathed and fur bristled. It was as if she had transformed; suddenly her slimness seemed to be skinniness, and the holly-green eyes laced with warm amber burned with an unwelcoming fire. "Hello, Bluestar," she growled. "Fancy seeing you here." *Bluestar? That's Bluestar? As in...* The *Bluestar?* She barely registered the awe that had just sprouted over her fear of the sudden transformation that the strange cat had made.

"You know the rules, Nightshade. You may only communicate with a medicine cat if they give consent. They belong in StarClan's paws

entirely." Bluestar's voice was somewhat calm, despite the fearsome monster of a cat before her.

Moonpaw turned and saw a blue-grey she-cat standing there. She radiated power, and her icy, pale blue eyes shone with the light of StarClan. She matched the elders' description of her perfectly. No, she far exceeded their descriptions. The respect that her presence somehow demanded, the commanding tilt of her head, the clear, confident gaze... This Bluestar was truly a sight to behold, one that words could hardly describe.

Moonpaw had thought that the black cat- Nightshade- was perhaps from StarClan, but the glimmer in her green-yellow eyes that Moonpaw now saw was not light but cruelty. She was but dirt compared to Bluestar.

"Ah, but Bluestar, she requested that I come to her!" Nightshade suddenly seemed very fake, with a false smile and a forced purr.

"Under your trickery, I am sure. Come, Moonpaw. Let us walk back to StarClan. It is not safe here." Upon being addressed by the newcomer, she found herself jumping again. Then, after briefly pausing, she hurried away from Nightshade and assumed a place at Bluestar's side.

"We will meet again, Moonpaw," crooned Nightshade as Bluestar guided her away. "Don't forget me."

I don't think I could if I tried, she thought with a wince. She almost turned back to where the black she-cat was, but something inside, a mild tugging sensation, stopped her. Instead, she just continued away with Bluestar.

However, she couldn't quite shake off the feeling that two green eyes were watching her maliciously the entire time.

Chapter 26

As Bluestar led the way, Moonpaw found that the trees began to lose their dead look. A few even had leaves. They were predominantly dead leaves, however. She was surprised that they were even still on the trees; they were very old, and looked like they would drop off at the slightest breeze. *Perhaps it doesn't work like that here,* she wondered. *Maybe there are no seasons here, only death.*

"Moonpaw, do you know who Nightshade is?" Bluestar asked. Her blue eyes were fixed on the white she-cat with an intenseness that made her want to look away, but she found that she couldn't. With a gulp, she shook her head.

"She is a member of the dark forest- the place we just were. In fact, she isn't just a member. Some would call her the leader. Of most of them, at least."

Fear gripped Moonpaw like a falcon scooping up prey in its eager talons. "That was the dark forest? *That* was Screech's daughter?"

A brief nod. Moonpaw realised that they were no longer anywhere near Nightshade. It felt as if they had been walking for mere seconds- they had, hadn't they?- but the dead trees were nowhere to be seen. The air no longer reeked of death and evil- in fact, a faint fragrance of grass and sweet-smelling wildflowers teased the breeze. Cats seemed to be appearing from nowhere, racing across meadows that seemed to roll out further than she could see. The foliage was a vibrant and luscious green, with flowers both familiar and unknown dotting the rich earth. Prey-scents were everywhere. Moonpaw found herself unable to stop relaxing as they padded across the hills.

"Moonpaw, watch out."

As soon as she looked up, she found herself walking head-first into a furry chest.

She jumped back, embarrassed. "Sorry!"

"No need to apologize, Moonpaw!" The cat laughed. Her voice was cheerful and warm, and was tinged with affection. She looked up to see warm amber eyes shining back at her, and a very familiar face. *It's her! The cat from Bumblestar's den!*

The cat was looking fondly down at her. "Yes, Moonpaw, it's me. I'm Heathermist, by the way."

Moonpaw's mouth opened to say something, but as soon as she registered the cat's name, she found herself lost for words.

Indeed, the sleek, fawn she-cat in front of her was Sunflame's sister. However, she reminded Moonpaw not of her father but of Hazelshade- their frames were both delicately thin, yet neither had seemed to gain any impression of muscles, even with all the hard work as a warrior.

"Anyway, are you going to do anything but stand there and gawk at me?" Heathermist's tone was teasing, but her eyes held a gleam of something that took Moonpaw by surprise; sadness. She beckoned with her tail. "I hope you don't mind, Bluestar, but I'd like to talk to my kin. I will deliver her your message, as well."

After the blue-grey she-cat had dipped her head slightly in farewell, Heathermist led Moonpaw away. They moved at a slow pace, Heathermist leading by a head.

"How is my brother?" Heathermist asked suddenly. A trace of nervousness had crept into her voice, and Moonpaw sensed that there was more than idle talk about family on the she-cat's mind. "I trust you aren't causing to much trouble for him?"

Moonpaw smiled. "He's fine," she reassured the she-cat, "and if anyone is causing trouble for him, it's Palepaw."

With a laugh, Heathermist nodded her agreement. "I've seen what kinds of mischief she gets up to."

It was quiet after that, and Moonpaw was growing impatient, a trait that she'd never discovered in herself. "Heathermist, what do you

really want to tell me?"

The she-cat jumped. She had stopped walking, and when she turned to Moonpaw she had assumed an embarrassed yet sorrowful smile. Her eyes still held their warmth, but a tinge of something else lurked- was it loneliness? "As soon as I've told you what you have to know, you will wake up. I know I'm being selfish, but I wanted to be with you a while longer. You are the closest I can be to my family."

Moonpaw wanted to comfort her. She didn't know how she would survive being separated from Palepaw, unable to speak to her for years. However, curiosity nagged her. Heathermist had told her that there was something she needed to know. What was it?

Before she could ask, Heathermist nodded. "Alright, I'd better hurry up. You can't stay here forever, and something tells me that the other medicine cats are rousing. Not to mention that I'll have Bluestar breathing down my back if I don't hurry up." With a smile, she turned her head back to where they had been, where a now small blue-grey cat could be seen watching them rather intently in the distance.

Moonpaw edged forward, anticipating what would come next.

"There is a prophecy, Moonpaw. A new one. I think you may remember it from a while ago, but only now will it be of use to you."

After a deep breath, the she-cat continued.
"Two souls of darkness, souls of piercing thorns. Two hearts of pure light, each as bright as stars. One dark cat, a stranger to your world. The claws of beauty will pierce the light, and foolish assumptions will be made."

I've heard this before. She was shocked when that thought emerged, and confused. *But where?*

There was something else nagging her mind. *I could have sworn that there was something else...* Then she shook her head. No, that was it.

Moonpaw hadn't realised the breath she'd been holding in until her vision began to fade. She took a deep breath of clean air, but found that it wasn't helping. The darkness remained in her vision, blocking out more of the beautiful landscape. Then it dawned on her. *I'm leaving, aren't I?*

The last thing she heard was Heathermist's voice- "Say hello to Sunflame for me!"- before the beautiful scenery darkened into black.

Chapter 27

When Moonpaw stirred from the slumber she had been locked into, she looked around to see that Heathermist was right; most of the medicine cats were indeed waking up. Not wanting to disturb anyone or get in the way, she turned around, eyes turning to the sky in wonder. *I can't believe that I was in StarClan! And I met Heathermist- and Bluestar!* As quickly as her thoughts turned to the StarClan cats, they transformed into more negative ones; the Dark Forest. Or, rather, its inhabitants.

"Moonpaw?" The voice made her jump. She turned around, unsurprised to find Silverleaf perched beside a large rock, blinking at her. "How was it?"

Well, let's see. I was falling through some supposedly deadly darkness, fell into the Dark Forest, met the leader of the Dark Forest, walked across StarClan with one of my heroes, spoke to Heathermist... You know, I have some conflicting emotions. Instead of saying what she had just thought, she replied with, "It was... Amazing." It had been, after all. In StarClan, at least.

Immediately Silverleaf's gaze warmed. "I'm glad that you enjoyed it," she purred. However, her eyes held something deeper. Like Heathermist, there seemed to be a tinge of a more negative emotion there, only hers was worry rather than sadness. *What was she told in StarClan?* She wondered, eyes drifting away from her mentor.

Whitepool was the only one still sleeping. Silverleaf padded over and sat beside her, gazing down in a surprisingly affectionate manner. It was usually Whitepool who took care of her aunt, calming her down and stopping her from overworking herself- or overworking Moonpaw, as was often the case. However, here it was clear by looking at the scene before her that the love went both ways.

After another minute, Whitepool finally began to stir. Moonpaw watched silently as Silverleaf gently pressed her nose to her former

apprentice's cheek in such a way of greeting. "Come on, slowshrew. You're the last one awake."

With one last look, Moonpaw turned to the rest of the cats, who were talking amongst themselves, with some nervousness. However, curiosity also sparked her mind. *I wonder what they saw?* She couldn't help but ask herself. She longed to ask, but something other than mere shyness stopped her.

She tensed slightly when Beechbark padded over, a warm gleam in his eyes. "So, how was it?"

Instantly she was reminded of the Dark Forest- then realised that he didn't know. For some reason, she didn't want to share her experience there. Instead she thought of StarClan, and smiled. "It was beautiful," she murmured. Her gaze momentarily darted to the Moonpool longingly, and she dared to wish that she was back there, amongst the vibrant trees, lush grass and sweet-smelling air.

"Come, Ashenpaw." Lostleg's meow jolted Moonpaw abruptly from a trance-like state. "There is something that Eveningstar must know."

"Don't you mean Quailfeather?" Ashenpaw replied, then winced. It had clearly not meant to come out.

"No, I mean Eveningstar. While she isn't at her strongest, she is still the Clan leader." With a sharp look aimed at his apprentice, he flicked his tail abruptly for her to follow, then led the way.

Ashenpaw waved her tail in farewell to the other medicine cats, then followed her mentor, trotting hastily along beside him.

Curiosity climbed Moonpaw like ivy on a tree. What made Ashenpaw speak of Quailfeather like she had? Was the deputy taking over Eveningstar's leader duties? Was the leader dying? From Palepaw's enthusiastic report of the gathering, she understood that RiverClan's once-pretty leader was scraggly and frail, the picture of illness.

"We'd better get going too, Moonpaw." Once again, a voice made her jump. This time, it was Silverleaf, Whitepool by her side. The

white she-cat looked incredibly disturbed, her eyes haunted. *Is she okay? What did she see?*

She never got the chance to ask the question as her mentor led the two away from the Moonpool.

"Goodbye, Moonpaw!" Beechbark called, waving his tail at her. She waved hers back, before padding after her the two. *Phew. One cat doesn't think you're crazy.*

As soon as she had arrived at Silverleaf's side, her mentor turned to her. "How was it?"

Moonpaw hesitated. Should she tell her? She could trust her, of course, but was she allowed to tell others?

After coming to the conclusion that she hadn't been told not to and therefore could share her experience, she explained, in as much detail as a short summary would allow, her experience, both in the Dark Forest and in StarClan.

Once she had finished, it was silent. Then, after swallowing, Silverleaf replied. "That prophecy..." Then she laughed, not without some bitterness. "Oh, Heathermist..."

At Moonpaw's confused look, she explained. "There is more to the prophecy. Your dear aunt just couldn't find it in her to tell you the rest of it."

"Why?" Moonpaw found herself asking, confusion getting the better of her. *Is it something that she thinks will scare me? Am I not allowed to know?* "Surely it's for a good reason?"

"I'll tell it to you. You can decide for yourself whether you want to hear it." The older she-cat ran her eyes across the light pelt of Whitepool, frowning suddenly. "But now is not the time. I'm sure that Heathermist refrained some information for a reason. You'll find out sooner or later."

A nagging frustration grasped at Moonpaw. Couldn't she just know now? It can't have been that bad. But she did not protest aloud; tiredness perched on her shoulder, looming over her like some great

bird in the dark sky. *At least I will find out eventually,* she reminded herself, though the thought barely processed.

The rest of the journey slid into silence, and Moonpaw hardly remembered her father greeting her hesitantly as she entered camp, Silverleaf warding him off, nor the other medicine cats' quiet conversation as she padded into the apprentices' den and curled into her nest, falling quickly into a dark slumber.

Until then, I can wait.

Chapter 28

"Up! Come on, you lazy cat. You're obviously awake."

Palepaw stirred, but did not make any move to fully awaken. *Maybe if I stay still...*

"Sleeping cats still breathe, mouse-brain. Get up."

After an attempt to hold her breath that resulted in a light head and a disgusted snort from her waker, she opened her eyes.

"Now, that's an ugly sight to wake up to," she commented drowsily as Thistlepaw's annoyed face and heavy frown came into view. That earned her a thwack to the head with a surprisingly sturdy tail.

It seemed that he was in a bad mood. *No, never mind. He's always in a bad mood.* "I'm getting up, I'm getting up," she muttered breezily, rolling over on her side and onto her paws. She then proceeded to groom herself, but did it so slowly that she could practically feel his furious glare, even with her eyes half-closed and her back to him.

Once finished, instead of following a beckoning Thistlepaw to where Wolfwhisker and Sorrelspots sat, she glanced round the camp. It was calm- as usual. Bumblestar and Hazelshade were in a deep conversation near Highrock, their heads close together. A short distance away sat Toadfur, grooming his pelt. Cherryblossom was chatting animatedly with Amberblaze a few mouse-lengths away, causing the nearby dark tom to cast occasional frustrated glances; he was evidently not a morning cat. Gingerheart and Redfeather were leaving camp for a drink, escorted by Sunflame. *Weird that Sunflame is going; it's not really that dangerous, going to the lake. Maybe Bumblestar's taking extra precautions for some reason.*

However, the one cat she was looking for wasn't there; Moonpaw. She hadn't seen her sister since she'd left for the moonpool that night, and questions were burning inside her mind. But before she could think of where to look for her, she was interrupted by an

impatient hiss.

It was Thistlepaw- unsurprisingly. "We haven't got all morning," he snapped.

The retort boiling in her mouth was cut off by his mentor. "Sorry, Palepaw, but he is right. You can see your sister later."

She turned to the group, confused. "How did you- okay, I'm coming." She hadn't realised that Wolfwhisker was perceptive. Then again, she hadn't realised much about him; he was generally quiet. She hurried over, ignoring Thistlepaw's short-tempered mutterings.

"Border patrol," her mentor chirped cheerfully. Palepaw nodded, but followed quietly. Unfortunately, as Sorrelspots took a place at the front of the patrol with Wolfwhisker, she was left to walk next to Thistlepaw.

"So..." She trailed off. She found it rather frustrating that she could talk to any other cat with ease, but not Thistlepaw; she really liked to talk, but he was just so... Uncomfortable to be around. She could picture her sister joking softly that Palepaw was tongue-tied because she liked him, but that was certainly not the case.

"Can I help you?" The curt reply made her bristle. Sure, she couldn't speak to him, but did he really have to be so rude?

She muttered back, "Not my fault you're so weird."

She was surprised to find that it had touched a nerve; he recoiled slightly, before hastily replying, "I am *not* weird. I just don't like you."

"Yeah, well, that's kind of obvious," she shot back, before hurrying the pace so she could catch up to her mentor. She could still feel his cold grey eyes on her back as she did so.

Why does he annoy me so much? No other cat makes me this angry. She huffed aloud. Her tail had begun to flick behind her, and she couldn't be bothered to stop it. She had to bite down the urge to swipe him over with her paw, which also shocked her; she wasn't used to feeling such violent emotions.

Instead, she asked her mentor, "How long until we reach the border?"

The response was quick. "Not long. See the hollowed-out tree over there?" She nodded. "That's the ShadowClan border."

Instantly she felt her pelt prickle up. The image of Ripplepaw and his obnoxious, arrogant gaze, followed by Eaglepaw's trembling body and piercing amber stare, flashed before her. There were certainly some ShadowClan cats that she didn't want to meet again. But then again...

"Hey! Palepaw! Over here! Palepawww!"

A small gasp escaped her jaws. "Echopaw?" She hurried her pace quickly, delighted to see the chatty ShadowClan apprentice.

She was with a golden she-cat who eyed the patrol carefully, as if searching for something, but she evidently couldn't find it. She broke into a strained smile. "A ThunderClan patrol approaches," she murmured. Her eyes were sad.

"Tansyfrost? What's wrong?" Wolfwhisker asked gently, tail flicking anxiously. "No cat has died, I hope?"

Instantly Tansyfrost lost her smile. "Only the best medicine cat, mentor and friend a cat could hope for."

Instantly Echopaw swooped over, pressing to the she-cat's side. "Hey! We agreed that there'd be no sadness on this patrol! Only happiness, and-- hey there, Palepaw! Sorry, I forgot to say hello again a moment ago. Flashstar sent me out with Tansyfrost! To distract her I think, because I'm apparently good at that. He said it was "all I am good for", which probably isn't true, hopefully. But it's great to see you! You've definitely grown! Maybe not by much, but that's okay because we're still young, right? Just the other day I was telling Ripplepaw about how we still seemed like kits, especially him since he had just--"

She was cut off by Tansyfrost's tail. Palepaw was doing her best to hold in her laughter, and a swift glance to her patrol only made that

harder; all three - including Thistlepaw, to her great amusement - were staring at Echopaw as if she were about to explode; with great wariness and worried stares. Tansyfrost muttered, "She's a bit of a chatterbox, this one." However, the outburst had lifted the burden somewhat; the slight sloping of the pretty she-cat's shoulders had disappeared, and her eyes looked a bit less hollow.

Wolfwhisker asked carefully, "Is there anything we could do to help?"

At the request, Tansyfrost's eyes widened. "Really? But I thought-" she broke off, shaking her head. "I'm very grateful. Please, if you have any spare catmint, half the Clan could do with it."

Palepaw was confused. Tansyfrost seemed surprised that they had offered. Why wouldn't the patrol help Tansyfrost? Sure, she was a ShadowClan cat, but she was a medicine cat. Wasn't it okay to help them anyway? The ThunderClan patrol, however, were being surprisingly friendly. Except for Thistlepaw, of course, who was glaring at the younger ShadowClan apprentice coldly, but Palepaw had hardly counted him as part of the patrol, anyway.

"We have plenty, in a clearing to the left and along the border, that way." Wolfwhisker nodded to the opposite direction. "We can split up if you want more, if that's alright with you."

The cats split into two groups- Palepaw with Wolfwhisker and Echopaw, and Thistlepaw with Sorrelspots and Tansyfrost. As the other group walked past, Palepaw only just caught the breath of a whisper from Tansyfrost; "I know it wasn't..."

Whatever had been said made Sorrelspots flinch suddenly, but Palepaw had no time to think as Echopaw suddenly leapt to her side. "Hey, Palepaw? Any idea why ShadowClan might not want ThunderClan's help? Because Flashstar always says that ThunderClan can't be trusted, because-"

She broke off suddenly. "Sorry. I'm probably not supposed to be saying this. You and that rather handsome grey tom leading us-" Palepaw heard a choking noise from in front of them following her friend's joking remark, "-are obviously from ThunderClan. But

you're my only friend, so I guess I can tell you more than others. I trust you. But I still can't..." She shook her head, clearly conflicted.

Palepaw shook her head. As eager as she was to know what Echopaw had been talking about, she didn't want her friend to get into trouble. "Don't tell me then, silly. I'm no ShadowClan cat, so you can't go telling me all of your Clan's secrets."

Echopaw grinned. "Thanks! Now, what were we here for, again? Oh, yes, to find this catmint. Tansyfrost showed me what it looked like, and it smells great! I definitely know what it--" She broke off when she realised that they were standing in a clearing that had a few clumps of catmint sprouted. "Oh. Okay. Well, were definitely here."

Palepaw scoffed. "Yeah. We are."

The three gathered as many stems as they could carry, and Palepaw was glad to see that ThunderClan still had plenty left. *Since when did we ever have this much catmint? In all those boring stories, lots of cats died because there wasn't any.* She shrugged. *I guess we're just lucky.*

Heading back to the others, Echopaw kept mumbling things, but they were efficiently muffled by the catmint in her mouth. Palepaw couldn't help but laugh at the slight exasperation in Wolfwhisker's eyes. He clearly did not enjoy the chatty apprentice scaring off all the prey.

As they approached, the golden medicine cat waved with her tail. "Oh, you were quick. We just got here, and we only had to walk a few fox-lengths to-- wow! That's a lot!" Tansyfrost's gloomy look disappeared, and was quickly replaced with one of delight as she took in the mass of catmint that Wolfwhisker's group had brought. The other patrol only had a few stalks.

"What? You can't give them all of that!" Thistlepaw was outraged. "Are you out of your minds? You know what ShadowClan have-have-" he was unable to finish his sentence due to the anger that was filling his gaze.

Wolfwhisker glared down at his apprentice sternly. " 'Each Clan has the right to be proud and independent, but in times of trouble they must forget their boundaries and fight side by side to protect the four. Each Clan must help the others so that no Clan will fall.' Or have you forgotten the warrior code?"

"It also says that your loyalty must remain to your Clan. If you are giving away all of our precious herbs, how are you doing that?"

Wolfwhisker shook his head. "Young Thistlepaw, you have a lot to learn. Now, I expect you to go straight back to camp. Tell Bumblestar that we have gone to ShadowClan to assist them. Make sure that Moonpaw knows where her sister is. I know how these two can get."

"Ooh, that's awesome! I can show you all the coolest spots in our camp!" Echopaw had spat out the catmint, and was bouncing around excitedly, listing off places to take her friend to, but Palepaw was hardly listening. *I'm going into ShadowClan territory?*

She was silent for the entire journey, nervousness nipping at her paws. The catmint laid out on her back had become heavy, the stalks in her mouth bitter. She had never liked the thought of entering the repulsive-smelling place, especially after her mother's stories, even if they weren't true. But here she was.

She kept close to Sorrelspots' side, who, too, Palepaw realised in surprise, was very tense.

But it was when they entered the camp that Palepaw felt truly scared, because dozens of cats were staring straight at her.

Chapter 29

It was almost sun-high when Moonpaw returned to camp, having been gathering marigold along the WindClan border with Whitepool. Her paws ached from the long trekking to and from the moorland, but it was nothing compared to the worry she felt for her sister's dawn patrol. They should be back by now! She had watched them leave from the den, groggy from sleep, early that morning, yet their scents were stale. Where were they?

She entered the den with the marigold in her jaws, following behind Whitepool, who began to spread her bundle- presumably to dry. She was so absorbed in doing the same with her bundle that she jumped as a cat behind her spoke her name. To her great surprise, it was Thistlepaw, sat in Silverleaf's nest as the silver and white medicine cat pulled something out of his paw with a quick jerk that made him wince.

"What?" She swallowed nervously. "Where is my sister?" Worry flooded through her body as she saw the flash of anger in him. "Is she okay?"

The snapped response stunned her. "Oh, she's fine. Just giving away half of our herbs to ShadowClan."

Silverleaf suddenly jerked away. "What? Is she out of her mind?"

"Silverleaf--"

"Quiet, Moonpaw. What is going on, apprentice?" Her fierce gaze was locked onto the bristling apprentice.

He grunted as he sat up in the nest. "Well, on the patrol we met some ShadowClan cats- the medicine cat Tansyfrost and her incredibly annoying friend, Echopaw. Wolfwhisker offered to give them catmint. Oh, and Tansyfrost's mentor died, by the way. I don't know when. Anyway, the patrol just gave away all of our catmint! I was told to run back and tell everyone where they were. I tripped

over a bramble tendril on my way back and that's how I got all these thorns in my paw."

Moonpaw was hardly surprised to see Thistlepaw furious. No, it was Silverleaf's outraged expression that stunned her. The older she-cat looked appalled. "How dare he? That foolish kit of a warrior doesn't know what he's done."

Moonpaw turned to Whitepool for answers as Silverleaf covered Thistlepaw's bleeding paw with a poultice reeking of marigold, but the white and grey she-cat looked just as confused. "Silverleaf, I'm sure it's not as bad as you think. If you could just--"

"Not the time, nor the place, to ask!" Silverleaf snapped back, throwing Moonpaw a hasty glance. She quickly finished off by smothering Thistlepaw's poulticed paw in cobwebs, then nudged him rather roughly out of the den, meeting his protests with another rough nudge. Moonpaw swallowed nervously. Had Silverleaf always been this careless with her patients? She didn't think so.

"Both of you need to keep in mind that ShadowClan do not trust us nor we them, and for good reason, too. After all, if left to grow, shadows will battle the storm clouds. The prophecy, Whitepool! Those storm clouds carry *thunder!*"

Moonpaw froze. "A prophecy? Silverleaf, you never--"

Silverleaf cracked a small, half-hearted smile. "What, a medicine cat can't have secrets? No, I didn't tell you. How could I, when it- oh, never mind!" Her gaze seemed to freeze the blood in Moonpaw's veins; it was so cold, so... So *wild* that it was all she could do to keep herself from flinching away.

After a long moment of nothing but the sound of Silverleaf's quick, furious breathing slowing, Moonpaw found herself able to move. She shuffled closer to Whitepool.

Silverleaf glanced darkly towards the entrance of the den, before padding out quickly. "You two have herbs to sort. *I* have a leader to talk to."

The older medicine cat left the other two she-cats as confused as motherless newborn kits.

A moment of tense silence crackled through the air, before Whitepool murmured, "Moonpaw, I think your sister could be in danger."

You think? She said nothing for a while, still shocked by the older she-cat's outbreak, until it dawned on her that she still did not know the prophecy that Silverleaf had spoken of. "By the way, what was - is - that prophecy?"

A pause. Then: "Silverleaf said most of it. I don't think she'd want you to know, but I don't think you'll give up." For some reason, that stung Moonpaw. The way she had said it seemed a bit frosty. It was nothing compared to Silverleaf's previous gaze, though, but for Whitepool, it was very cold. "It goes something like this: *The light has risen. With the nourishment of this light, shadows will battle the dark clouds, making way for clear skies, taking the thunder within with it.*"

Moonpaw felt the fur along her spine bristle. "Have you any idea what it means yet?"

But Whitepool wasn't listening. Her ears were pricked, her pelt bristling, frozen into place, as a set of hurried pawsteps quickly drew closer.

Instantly Moonpaw was nudged out of the way as Whitepool dived for a pile of moss in the corner of the den. "Bring her in!" She called out. *Why does she sound so scared?* Moonpaw wondered as she shuffled away, standing by the side of the den to keep out of the way; something told her that she would need to, though she didn't know why. She saw Thistlepaw limp out quickly. *What's going on?*

But she soon found out, as the unmoving pelt of Gingerheart was carried in, dripping blood and water.

Chapter 30

At least, it felt like dozens of cats were staring at Palepaw, because she was at the head of the patrol, Sorrelspots next to her.

She quickly shuffled to the side to let the ShadowClan medicine cat and apprentice through, then flattened back against her mentor.

The ShadowClan camp was quite spacious, perhaps even larger than ThunderClan's, and was certainly flatter. The camp floor, like the rest of their territory, was coated in pine needles, soft and springy and very uncomfortable underpaw. However, despite the unsettling feeling prickling up her spine much like the needles beneath her, she couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to explore the place. The dens were all dark, but didn't that just mean that there were plenty of secrets hidden in there? If that were the case, maybe she could have a peek in. Perhaps nobody would notice if she--

"Echopaw? What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

The stray paw that had been lifting off of the ground ever so slightly slammed back down with a muffled thud as a tom padded over. His light grey fur was flecked with white, like snow, and his eyes, a pale amber, were as icy as his pelt. Though he had spoken in a hushed whisper, the anger in his voice was obvious. "Why have you brought these... *ThunderClan* cats here?" He said the name of the other Clan with such venom that it wasn't just Palepaw who was startled at his hostility; she saw Sorrelspots flinch, and even Wolfwhisker's tail lashed.

The ShadowClan apprentice, however, seemed unbothered. She quickly put the bundle of catmint in her mouth onto her back so she could speak more clearly. "Blizzardnose! This is Palepaw! She's my best friend and she's given us catmint! I mean, it wasn't specifically her, it was her patrol in general, but they gave us lots! I had so much fun! We went onto--"

"Echopaw, Tansyfrost, drop those herbs." It was another voice, one

much colder than the first.

Palepaw's head whipped to the side, just in time to catch a flash of black lashing out towards her chatty friend's pelt. Echopaw flinched back, but there was no need; with expert precision, claws hooked around the catmint on her back and dragged it to the prickly forest floor.

Recognition flashed in her mind almost immediately. *Ratstone! The deputy!* She glanced quickly to her side, and she eyed Sorrelspots nervously; the last time her mentor had seen the ShadowClan deputy, she had seemed very shaken up. As she had expected, her mentor had that haunted look in her eyes, as if the "blow" had been aimed at her. Wolfwhisker also looked quite stunned. Even the white-flecked tom from before - Blizzardnose - was silenced by the arrival of the large tom, stepping back instantly. *Great StarClan! Is this tom evil or something? Everyone seems afraid of him! Or maybe that's just his position in the Clan. But nobody acts like that around Shrewfoot... What is up with ShadowClan?*

"You just can't trust ThunderClan. How do we know that they haven't poisoned these herbs?"

"Who do you think we are, a bunch of foxes? Why would you think something like that? We'd never!" Palepaw lashed her tail in anger.

Ratstone sneered at her, the coldness in his dark eyes rooting her to the spot. "Actually, apprentice, that is exactly something that I would expect ThunderClan to do."

Tansyfrost gently nudged Palepaw behind her as she replied, the cheeriness in her voice painfully forced. "We were right there. They did nothing to the plants - or us - as we picked them. Besides, it would surely be foolish to pass up on a chance to lower ThunderClan's herb stock." At this, Palepaw looked at the she-cat incredulously. She hadn't seemed like those were her intentions when they had been gathering the herbs.

"She's lying for us," Sorrelspots breathed in her apprentice's ear. "She is possibly the only cat in ShadowClan who can see clearly past her own nose."

The black tom seemed to consider what the medicine cat had said. After a long moment where it seemed that even the birds held their breaths, he turned his head away from the group and towards a den.

"Leader's den. Flashstar will decide what happens to this ThunderClan..." He paused as if pondering the right word to use.

" 'Cats' is fine, Ratstone," Wolfwhisker replied coldly. Was his pelt prickling?

"... filth," finished the dark tom, blatantly ignoring both what the tom had said previously and how Sorrelspots' claws were unsheathed.

With a powerful air of arrogance that only StarClan deserved to own, Ratstone began striding across the clearing to the den, surprisingly silent despite his large size and the springy needles beneath him.

Palepaw suddenly found herself aware of all the gazes on their pelts. When they'd entered, the hostile eyes had been on them, but only half of the Clan had been there. Now, there were almost double that amount of cats, most of which were glaring at them.

"Do we follow?" Palepaw heard her mentor murmur - half to Wolfwhisker, half to herself. "It could be a trap."

The tom shook his head. "It won't be a trap. Even ShadowClan wouldn't stoop that low. Flashstar will surely be reasonable. Come on." With that, he turned and followed the black deputy. From behind, Palepaw could see that he was fighting to keep his cool; his tail twitched every now and then, his ears were half-flattened and he was making evident attempts to keep his pelt smooth. It reminded Palepaw that Wolfwhisker, while level-headed and wise, was younger than her own father by six moons, and only older than her by twelve.

She couldn't help but think that he didn't sound very confident in what he'd said.

Palepaw barely remembered to breathe. She had been so absorbed in the scene unfolding before her that she hadn't realised that her paws were trembling, she'd been holding her breath, and her claws were unsheathed. Upon noticing this, she took a deep breath, sheathed her claws and tensed her legs, forcing herself to stay still as she turned to her mentor. "We'll be alright, right?"

But Sorrelspots didn't seem to have an answer. She swallowed, shook herself, then began briskly following Wolfwhisker. Not wanting to be left behind with ShadowClan, Palepaw rushed forward as well, hardly leaving her mentor's side.

Tansyfrost and Echopaw followed, too, but Palepaw had all but forgotten them as they reached the black tom.

The den seemed relatively small compared to Bumblestar's, but warmer; thin fir branches had been woven across the sides, blocking any gaps and most likely leaving a draft-free den. However, it was dark and by no means cosy, especially with the snarl that echoed out of the entrance, followed swiftly by a quiet whimper, then more snarling. Due to the thick walls and small entrance, Palepaw couldn't grasp anything that was said inside the den, but from the sounds alone she could tell that it wasn't good.

They stood a few fox-lengths away from the den, a few mouse-lengths away from Ratstone, whose gaze was on the entrance to camp, where a ginger and white she-cat and blue-grey tom stood, eyeing them warily.

"I have a patrol waiting for me." He spoke coldly to the cats, not bothering to acknowledge their presence with more than a sideways glance. "Don't think about running, or I will find you."

Palepaw didn't doubt that.

The black tom left them quickly, leaving the group of ThunderClan cats - and Tansyfrost and Echopaw - to face Flashstar's den and its sinister owner.

Chapter 31

As they moved towards the entrance of the den, the ThunderClan cats could hear the commotion from inside more clearly. Palepaw could even see into the den from where she waited, though all she could see was the small white body and brown tail of... *Eaglepaw?*

By the sounds of it, Flashstar was scolding him harshly. "I made you an apprentice! Why must you show yourself to be so ungrateful? The other apprentices can bring back prey. Are you not strong enough? Do we need to send you back to the nursery?" Though the small apprentice's eyes had been squeezed shut the entire time Palepaw had been watching, ears flattened and tail tucked between his legs, the last question made him quiver like a leaf.

"You can't," he squeaked, his voice but a hoarse whisper. *His mother is dead,* Palepaw remembered, swallowing as she watched the exchange. *How could Flashstar be so cruel to him?*

Flashstar misinterpreted Eaglepaw's fear for contradiction, his tail lashing, but then paused. "You have a point. Your foolish mother isn't here, obviously, and your father... Well, what's Dustmuzzle going to do? He's blind now. The coward deserved it, though."

The way he says it makes it seem like he's the one responsible for whatever happened to this "Dustmuzzle". Palepaw looked at her mentor, suddenly seeking a reassuring pelt to press into - a feeling she didn't think she'd ever felt before. Of course, she'd never been faced with having to suffer the wrath of the leader of a Clan of cats that hated her. Still, she'd never been the type to seek another's comfort, yet now her mind was plagued with memories of the nursery, her father's inviting fur and her mother's soothing grooming. Would her mentor mind?

She'd been sadly mistaken. Sorrelspots was staring wide-eyed at her paws, as if she could no longer hear her surroundings- or didn't want to. Palepaw didn't want to disturb her, so instead stayed where she was.

Wolfwhisker was watching Sorrelspots, gaze filled with concern for the older warrior. Almost a year younger than Sorrelspots, it seemed strange that he was the calmest one in the group. *ShadowClan must have done something terrible to Sorrelspots,* she thought, *for such a normally cheerful cat to be so troubled by their presence.*

As much as Palepaw wanted to find out about whatever was going on with her mentor or the cruel conversation inside the den, she had no chance as Eaglepaw scampered past, his fur bristling as if he were pretending to be a badger, reeking of fear-scent. It was then, at that moment, that Flashstar noticed the group of cats.

"Oh," was all he said at first. Then, "You had better come in."

Wolfwhisker once again took the lead, gently flicking his tail against Sorrelspots' side as he passed her, awakening her from her trance-like state. She turned to Palepaw, motioning for her to go in first.

Not wanting to annoy the ShadowClan leader, she hurried in quickly, standing next to Wolfwhisker as he stood in front of the white tom, surprisingly still as the leader's eyes seemed to appraise him.

"So, ThunderClan sends it's youngest cats to a Clan that it doesn't get along well with, does it? Wise, aren't you," he commented sarcastically. He seemed strangely calm compared to Ratstone's show of disgust, though it chilled her to the bone.

"If you'd allow us to explain," Wolfwhisker replied just as calmly, "you would understand that we didn't expect this kind of treatment. We merely saw a cat in need," he flicked his tail towards Tansyfrost, who had just emerged into the den and now sat beside Sorrelspots, "and tried to help."

"We've brought you catmint for your Clan," added Sorrelspots shakily. *Isn't she supposed to be older than Wolfwhisker? What happened to that bouncy, cheerful mentor I know?*

The white tom stayed silent, though Palepaw noticed that his sleek

tail had curled at the end slightly. She shuffled a bit closer to Wolfwhisker.

"ShadowClan cannot make decisions for itself, if seems." He murmured. "Did you get permission to enter our lands? To trespass in our camp? To disturb my Clan in a time of great sickness? Or do you just perceive us as a Clan that will allow itself to be walked over?"

Wolfwhisker was silent for a time, evidently being careful with his word choice. Seeing this, Sorrelspots spoke up hesitantly. "We mean no harm, Flashstar. The herbs are free."

This time, the reply came instantly. "Perhaps ThunderClan is boasting, then? Do you not think that we can cure our own colds?"

"Why are you so quick to pick a fight with us? What did we do?" Palepaw burst out, then immediately shrunk back as the leader stood and took a step towards her. *Why did I speak? I'm such a mouse-brain! That's the ShadowClan leader I just snapped at!*

"Know your place, *kit*," was all he said. Palepaw certainly felt like she was a kit now, shaking and cowering beneath the hot gaze of the white tom. Then, turning back to Wolfwhisker, whose icy blue eyes were hooded with fresh dread, he sat down again. "We will be keeping your herbs, but we require something else, too."

Tansyfrost, who had sighed with relief at the first half of Flashstar's sentence, now stood, frozen. "Shouldn't we just let them go in peace? We don't want to start a war with ThunderClan again."

The leader released a scoff that echoed in the cold silence of the den. "Is that what ThunderClan did? They killed Flamestar, for one. Deny it as you like, but I recognised the scent of ThunderClan on his pelt."

What? Does that make a cat in ThunderClan a murderer? The thought made Palepaw feel even fainter than being in the presence of the ShadowClan leader did. *If my head gets any lighter, I might begin to drift away!*

"And that's not all. We have been told by StarClan to look out for you. What do you expect us to do when three ThunderClan cats trespass? Of course we're going to keep you hostage for a while!"

A strong, strange urge to unhygienically remove the contents of her stomach overcame Palepaw. She could hardly comprehend what the white tom had just said.

Tansyfrost began to protest. "Flashstar, you're being unreasonable. These cats don't want to hurt us! They brought along an apprentice just two moons into training! I don't think StarClan would want--"

"StarClan can come and tell us if they aren't happy with us. However, until that happens, as far as I'm aware I make the decisions here. Take them to the apprentices' den- it's the smallest. Ripplepaw can sleep in the warriors' den, and the other two can go back to the nursery for now. Splashnose surely won't mind some company for her new kits, and Ripplepaw is as skilled as more than half of the warriors in the Clan. In fact, I think I might make him a warrior."

The golden medicine cat clearly wanted to disagree with her leader, but didn't. *It wouldn't get her anywhere, anyway,* Palepaw realised, a sinking feeling bubbling in her stomach. *This leader is too stubborn.* "As you wish," she murmured, closing her eyes for a short time before beckoning for the three ThunderClan cats to follow her. "Come on. I'll get you settled."

~

Shortly afterwards, Palepaw found herself huddled beside her mentor on a bed of prickly needles. The apprentices' den was a lot colder than Flashstar's, and in the chill of the evening, Palepaw found herself shivering. *I don't think I've ever wanted Moonpaw's thick fur as much as I do now,* she thought, fluffing up her pelt. *Mine's too short and too thin to give me much protection.*

Wolfwhisker, who had been sat closer to the entrance, watching the ShadowClan camp's activity silently, seemed to hear her shivering and padded over, settling down beside the two she-cats and draping his bushy tail across their flanks. "If I could give you some fur, I

would," he mused, "but you'll have to settle for this."

Sorrelspots barely responded, so Palepaw murmured a quiet word of thanks. *Is Sorrelspots okay? She's been far too quiet. Something must really be bothering her.*

Unable to stay quiet any longer, Palepaw turned to the tortoiseshell. "Sorrelspots, are you okay?"

Her mentor jumped at the sound of her name, then finally seemed to take in her surroundings. Upon noticing the tail on her flank, she bristled, gaze instantly darting to her paws. "Oh... thanks, Wolfwhisker," she murmured softly. *Did she even hear my question?*

"Palepaw just asked if you were alright." The grey tom gazed steadily at her bowed head. "Are you?"

She flinched. "I just don't like ShadowClan at all," she whispered, eyes closing. Her head shook slightly as she lowered it to the ground, and when Palepaw saw her eyes, half-closed and filled with fear, she froze for a moment.

Wolfwhisker nudged her gently. "Hey, it's alright. They may be cruel, but they still follow the warrior code. They won't harm us."

Palepaw wormed her way out from between the two warriors, then padded to the entrance of the den, sitting down where Wolfwhisker had sat before. Feeling surprisingly brave despite their situation - or perhaps it was just that Sorrelspots seemed so scared that the contrast made her feel like she was brave? - she peered out of the den.

It surprised her how similar the Clan was to her own.

Though it wasn't surrounded by the stone walls that protected ThunderClan, the ShadowClan camp was enclosed in tightly woven brambles interlaced with the same type of branches that all of the dens had blocking drafts, making it seem just as safe. It was relatively empty, understandable as it was evening, but the cats that were there were gathered in groups of twos and threes, sharing tongues and talking quietly amongst themselves. *These are no fox-*

sized, fox-hearted warriors, she realised, regretting believing her mother's tales for an instant.

Then she remembered Ratstone, and her nose wrinkled. *Forget it. He's definitely part fox.*

Of course, the ShadowClan camp also seemed to have its problems. A short-furred, scarred brown she-cat seemed to be taunting a white cat -- *hey, isn't that Lilytail, from the gathering?*

She almost called out to the pretty she-cat, but was abruptly knocked back by a grey paw.

"You shouldn't leave the den. Flashstar will have your noses." *And that bossy voice belongs to...*

"Hello, Ripplepaw," she waved her tail at the dark grey apprentice, who just narrowed his eyes at her.

"I'm on guard duty with Lilytail tonight. It may be stupid of Flashstar to keep you here, but I'm not about to let you escape, so get back in there." As if proving his point, he sat down at the entrance of the den, blocking half of her view of the shady camp.

With a scowl, she slunk back to her Clanmates, sitting beside them once again. She was chilly, but wasn't in the mood to disturb them by snuggling up against them. She fluffed out her fur and glared at the fur on Ripplepaw's back. *Maybe if I'm lucky, StarClan will suddenly grant me eyes that shoot fire wherever I look.* The thought of Ripplepaw hopping around the camp, shrieking as he tried to outrun his burning tail, plagued her mind, and she had to look away to keep a straight face.

"We aren't getting out of here any time soon," Wolfwhisker spoke suddenly, making her jump, "so you may as well try to get some sleep. Look, Sorrelspots is already dreaming."

She turned to the two warriors, and sure enough, the tortoiseshell had curled up on her side next to the tom and was fast asleep, her breathing slow and even.

She nodded, edging closer to them until she could feel their

warmth, but not so close that she touched her sleeping mentor, and settled down beside the two.

In a surprisingly short time after, helped by the knowledge that Wolfwhisker's observant gaze watched over his Clanmates, Palepaw too found herself drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 32

"Redfeather? What happened?"

Whitepool's voice was commanding, unusual for the gentle she-cat. Gingerheart was being lowered into a hastily prepared nest by Sunflame and Redfeather, who, upon being asked the question, shuddered.

"I don't know," she breathed, her voice cracked with emotion. "I turned around for a moment, and Sunflame and Gingerheart had disappeared. I found Sunflame later, carrying her body. He said he found her like this, lying in a calm part of the stream."

Moonpaw swallowed. She could think of a few cats that could easily twist that story.

If Sunflame knew this fact, he didn't show it. "I know it was foolish to leave Redfeather alone, but Gingerheart was missing. I had to find her."

Whitepool nodded. "I understand," she murmured. As soon as the she-cat was placed in the nest, she began checking her over hastily. Upon the first instance of touching her, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Still alive. She has been scratched, badly. There is a deep wound on her throat; whatever attacked her knew what they wanted to do. This could have been the fox that Eveningstar warned us about in the gathering, or perhaps... No. It was probably the fox."

Whitepool began cleaning the wounds hastily, beckoning for Moonpaw to do the same. Instantly she jumped up. Finally, a chance to be useful! Maneuvering carefully so she didn't step on Gingerheart's tail, she began quickly rasping her tongue over a deep gnash in the she-cat's flank. It was a shock to taste cat blood; unlike the salty tang of warm prey, it was metallic, and very bitter.

At that moment, Silverleaf burst in, and, upon seeing the frail elder, rushed over to the recently gathered marigold, snatching a few

stalks and chewing them hastily. Once into a pulp, she spat it into her paw. As soon as Whitepool had finished cleaning the main wound, she plastered it on.

"Moonpaw. Cobwebs."

She immediately stopped what she was doing, glad to be free of that sour taste, and scrambled over to the herb store. *Cobwebs... Cobwebs... Where are they? Come on, Moonpaw!*

Her eyes caught onto the pale silk of cobwebs spread out on a rock and she grasped them in her teeth, hastily passing them to Silverleaf, who covered the marigold on the wound with them.

"Moonpaw. More marigold."

~

The remaining hours of daylight were spent with Moonpaw fetching herbs and cobwebs while Whitepool and Silverleaf treated the elder. She was so tired by the end of it that she barely realised that her muzzle was coated in blood and marigold juice, it was dusk, and she felt incredibly nauseous.

She must have shown the latter, because as soon as Gingerheart was settled into a nest, unconscious, Silverleaf turned to her, looked her up and down once, then told her to clean up and get some prey.

She padded out of the den on paws that felt heavier than stone, eyes on the ground.

That was my first patient, she thought, a fresh wave of nausea crashing down on her. *That was my first--*

"Moonpaw? Are you okay?"

She whirled around, and to her surprise, Hazelshade was standing there, her head tilted. Worry shone in her light brown eyes. *Sunflame's mother! I've never really talked much to her before. I'd better not mess up what I say.*

"I-- well-- y-yes." *So much for not messing up. You're just wonderful,*

Moonpaw. Now she'll think you're a coward. Stuttering like that, you may as well be a kit!

Moonpaw didn't know much about her grandmother, but she knew that her relationship with her son hadn't always been good. Because of this, Moonpaw had always worried about being around the older she-cat; would she like his kits? However, from what little she had said to her family, it was clear that whatever she or her son had done had been forgiven by the other.

The anxiousness from her eyes disappeared quickly. "Good. You look like you've just had a nasty scratch from a badger."

Moonpaw's eyes lowered. "I feel like it, too," she mumbled. Sitting down, she began grooming her thick, white fur, trying to ignore the thoughtful gaze burning into her head as she cleaned the blood off of her. When it came to her muzzle, however, she found herself unable to completely clean it, even using her paws. The blood there was too thick.

"I'll take you to the stream," Hazelshade volunteered quickly, getting to her paws. *Is she nervous to be with me?* Moonpaw wondered suddenly. *She seems quick to have something to do.* Then she scolded herself. *Not everybody is as cowardly as you.*

She got to her paws and followed the silver tabby out of camp, silent as she did so. *Is this the part where I talk to her? This silence feels uncomfortable.* But as she opened her mouth to speak, she found herself unable to. *What do I say?*

"This is a first." Hazelshade spoke so suddenly that Moonpaw almost tripped over an unearthed root. *And probably a last, now! Stop acting so jumpy, scaredy-paws! You don't need another cat thinking- no, knowing- you're weird!* "I don't think I've spoken to you much. At all, maybe."

"I suppose not," She mumbled back, quietly stepping over the root, but not before shooting it a half-hearted glare. *Nice try, root. You can't trip me up! Oh, but now I'm talking to something that has no thoughts or feelings. And in my mind nonetheless. Aren't I smart.*

An awkward silence, then, once again, Hazelshade spoke out of the blue. This time, Moonpaw made sure to step over a conveniently placed rock- and not to smugly say so in her mind. "I wasn't a very good mother to your father."

It had been blurted out without much thought, though soon after, Hazelshade began metaphorically scrambling around to explain. "I didn't mean to ignore him all the time! He just looked so much like his father that I couldn't stop myself freezing up every time I saw his eyes. I didn't realise I was being so rude. I guess it was just my feelings towards Goldensun coming out. He killed my mother, for StarClan's sake! The *leader* of our Clan!"

Moonpaw felt shocked, and not just because there was a Clanmate's blood coating her muzzle. *Here I was, thinking that Hazelshade was the calm one here. She seems even more panicky than me! And Sunflame's father killed the previous leader? No wonder everyone seems to mentally curse our blood! I knew he'd become a rogue, but not why!*

The warrior seemed to sense her thoughts. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to blurt it all out like that. It's just... Sunflame forgave me, just like that. He has trust issues, I swear; I spent his whole life emotionally neglecting him! He shouldn't just do that!"

Again, she paused, as if embarrassed. "I also shouldn't be unloading my feelings on you. You're an apprentice, and you've just seen a cat nearly die!" *As if I need reminding,* she thought sourly. "I just... I don't think I can tell Sunflame this. I talk to Bumblestar a lot--"

She broke off suddenly, seeming nervous. "Only because he seems to understand what I was feeling and why I was acting like I was. Nothing else." *She likes Bumblestar. Either that, or they're* very *close friends.*

Another pause. "But I don't think I could talk to Sunflame directly. I know he forgave me, but I'm still guilty. So I guess I've kind of unloaded it on the closest cat to him I can; Palepaw acts younger than you, and Amberblaze isn't his kin, so she may not understand as well, and I've hardly said a word to her, anyways. Sorry."

Forget me, this cat is definitely worrying too much. She swallowed,

hesitant to interrupt the newfound silence that, rather than being filled with hesitation, was ripe with worry- Hazelshade's worry. "I... Don't really know what to say to that." *Genius, Moonpaw. You're an absolute genius.* "Um... Thanks for telling me?" *Seriously, Moonpaw, you should be famous for your encouraging speeches.* "I... I think you're overreacting." *Okay. Forget sarcasm. I'm awful.*

Hazelshade had stopped, and was watching Moonpaw with almost curious eyes. "You really aren't very emotionally supportive," she murmured. Then she laughed. *Oh. Have I turned her crazy? I didn't think I was that awful.*

Upon seeing Moonpaw's confused look, she smiled kindly. "I'm sorry. I've just never met anyone so... Different in their, uh... socialisation methods." Moonpaw didn't know whether to feel hurt that she was being kindly and indirectly insulted or relieved that Hazelshade didn't really hate her for being verbally useless. "But I suppose you're right. I am overreacting. Sunflame's forgiven me, so I'm the only one putting strain on the relationship. He probably doesn't even notice it though, the mouse-brain that he is!"

She gently nudged Moonpaw with her tail. "I guess you're not bad in your socialising. Just different. And maybe different was what I needed. Thank you."

"Yeah... Um... You're welcome. Sorry for being a bit useless." *Well, they do say that a cat who acknowledges their weaknesses is an honest, courageous cat. Maybe I'm courageous, but I just don't know it.* She mentally paused, then shook her head. Mentally shook it, of course. *No, I'm just scared.*

They walked for a few more moments- during which Hazelshade reassured her that she was not the flawed cat that she definitely was- before they reached the stream.

It was quiet there, with only the rustle of leaves, chirping of birds and soft gurgle of the flowing water to disrupt the quiet. Slowly, Moonpaw began to climb into the slow-moving stream, careful of where to put her paws. *Hazelshade already probably knows I'm weird. I don't need her knowing about the clumsiness, too.*

She was in luck; not once throughout the entire time it took for her to wash her pelt- but mostly her muzzle- did she trip. Even climbing out went relatively smoothly, though that was because Hazelshade had to lift her out; the mud may have been easy enough to slide down, but she couldn't climb back up.

The way back went smoother than the way there, and seemingly quicker. They exchanged a few words, though most of those were just Hazelshade trying to fill the silence and not realising that Moonpaw didn't feel nervous around her any more. All of this relieved her, though. *I may be the weirdest cat in the Clan, but maybe I'm not the only one who overthinks things.*

Strangely reassured by that fact, she felt quite content with the silence that engulfed their journey more than once.

Upon entering the camp, however, her silence was broken.

"Moonpaw! Thank goodness you're here!"

It was Sunflame. Upon seeing him, Hazelshade's tail tip twitched, but other than that she seemed calm. "Is everything alright?"

Turning to her, he shook his head. Moonpaw could now feel the worry in the air. "Palepaw's patrol isn't back. The dusk patrol just returned, and they scented ShadowClan scents on our side of the border, and Palepaw and the others' scents with them. I was worried you'd been taken, too, Moonpaw."

The white apprentice swallowed. Palepaw still wasn't back? Was she okay? Had the ShadowClan cats kidnapped her?

"What are we doing about it?" Hazelshade asked, worry lining her voice.

Sunflame shook his head. "Bumblestar has just sent Shrewfoot out with a patrol to wait at the border for any passing ShadowClan cats. I wanted to go but he just called me a worried father and told me to wait for you. I'm so glad you're alright. If anything had happened to you..."

Moonpaw hardly felt the trembling in her paws. "Palepaw's been

kidnapped by ShadowClan? B-but-- they..." She didn't continue- couldn't continue. She didn't know what was going on between ThunderClan and ShadowClan, but they were definitely not on good terms. Worry gnawed at her mind. What if they didn't return her? What if they forced her to be a ShadowClan cat? Or worse, what if they--

She didn't allow her train of thought to continue, knowing that she would only worry more. She didn't know what to do. Could she do anything? She doubted that a medicine cat apprentice with one and a half moons of warrior training could do much against an entire Clan. But surely she shouldn't just sit around and wait for her to return.

As if sensing the new shock in her mind, Hazelshade turned to her. "Get some sleep, Moonpaw. I can promise you that if she isn't back by sunrise, we'll march right into ShadowClan camp and bring her back."

Moonpaw barely heard her words, but her body acted, carrying her to the apprentice's den. She flopped ungraciously into the first nest she recognised- luckily, it was hers- and found herself surprisingly worn out. *Or unsurprisingly, considering what's been going on today,* she thought absentmindedly.

Something tugged at her mind, something about staying awake for her sister, but before she knew it, she was lost to her dreams.

~

Are there any characters that you would like to see more of?

Chapter 33

"Palepaw?"

Wait, let me sleep...

"Palepaw, wake up!"

Just a few more minutes...

"Come on, Palepaw!"

Palepaw groaned, opening her eyes. "Sorry, Sorrelspots, I'll be up for warrior training in a minute..."

An abrupt shove to her shoulder instantly had her on her paws. "S-sorry!" She yelped, wincing at the new throbbing in her shoulder. *What's gotten into Sorrelspots? She's never hurt me before. She's usually so patient. Maybe we've got a long day of training, or maybe I've promised to do something.* She began shuffling around in her nest, trying to lift her aching body off the ground, but then she froze. *This isn't my nest. I'm not in ThunderClan.* Memory of where she was made her jump up in surprise, and the sight before her made her shrink back down again.

"I see that ThunderClan cats don't listen to their mentors. No wonder they're all rude and reckless. Although it's not like they would have much to learn from, anyway." *Wait, that's not Sorrelspots.*

Indeed it wasn't; the large form of Ratstone stood before her, beady eyes fixed on hers. *He has this weird way of making you feel like prey,* she mused to herself humorlessly. Sorrelspots had been the one trying to wake her at first- she would recognise her mentor's voice anywhere- but judging by the way that she now had her tail wrapped protectively around her apprentice's body, she quickly came to the conclusion that Ratstone had been the one to shove her.

"You can sleep later, little apprentice." *I'm not that small! You're just huge!* "You and your friends have some visitors." *What? Who would visit us in ShadowClan? Who even knows that we're here? Who is it?*

"Come, Palepaw," murmured Sorrelspots, leading her out of the den, cautiously stepping around Ratstone. Palepaw was so confused, yet she felt like she was missing a vital part of what was going on. Who was visiting them? Why?

As soon as she was out of the den, however, she realised why she felt a bit stupid.

She *was* stupid.

Obviously, *ThunderClan* would be the visitors.

Shrewfoot led a large patrol, standing at the front, glaring at Flashstar, who stood bristling with hostility. Raventail and Kestreltail stood either side of him, and Hazelshade, Swanfeather and Thistleheart stood behind them. *Bumblestar's sent relatives of all of us,* she realised, a sudden warmth blooming in her heart. *He's a kind cat.*

Upon seeing her sister, Sorrelspots made to rush over, only to be blocked by Ratstone's large paw. "You are our prisoners," he hissed coldly. "Remember that." Her eyes widened and her form instantly shrunk as she stuttered out a response.

Wolfwhisker, who had been waiting outside the den with Lilytail and Ripplepaw, instantly went to her side. "We're aware of our current status," he said carefully, "but forgive us if we want to rejoin our Clanmates."

Flashstar turned at the young tom's voice. "Let them go to their Clanmates, Ratstone," he said, surprising all the ThunderClan cats. The ShadowClan leader stood still as Sorrelspots scurried over to her sister, who instantly pressed against the tortoiseshell.

Palepaw found herself padding to the most familiar pelt in the patrol; Hazelshade's. She hesitated when she stood a mouse-length away, however, not sure how Sunflame's mother would take to a

sudden show of affection, but before she could think, a lithe tail swept her up, pulling her quickly to a silver and white body.

She breathed in the familiar scent of ThunderClan, her fear soothed by the purrs coming from the older she-cat. "I'm sorry we didn't come sooner, Palepaw," Hazelshade murmured, "but I'm here now."

When someone cleared their throat, she remembered where she was, and her head snapped back to where the ShadowClan leader stood, watching the patrol with an almost amused expression. She heard the quiet rustling from Wolfwhisker as he made his way over to his father and older brother stop.

"This is all very touching," murmured the white tom, his amber eyes dancing like fire in the moonlight, "but I'm afraid that we can't let any of you leave." *What?* "I assume that you will be wanting to take our prisoners with you, but I can't let you do that; they belong to ShadowClan."

Shrewfoot's hackles raised, his tail lashing swiftly. Raventail, who had been watching Palepaw and Hazelshade with a burning gaze that Palepaw had hardly noticed, stepped forward. "Are you trying to start a war with ThunderClan? Because if you keep pulling stunts like this, you'll get one."

A war with ShadowClan... Palepaw shivered at the thought of meeting any of the cats - but especially Ratstone - in battle. She hadn't hurt anything larger than a squirrel before, and while she knew she was being prepared for it, she certainly didn't look forward to the day she would fight a real battle.

Again, that amused look on Flashstar's face. *Does he find this funny? That look is really starting to annoy me.* "Actually, a war with ThunderClan couldn't hurt. Anything to bring us one step closer to cleansing the Clans of your filth is fine by me."

This time, it wasn't just ThunderClan cats that seemed unsettled by his bold words. *Cleansing the Clans? ThunderClan filth? Has he been recieving prophecies or something?* She almost shuddered. *But where did he get the idea that ThunderClan was corrupted? I don't think that any cat in our Clan is evil.*

"We're leaving, Flashstar," Shrewfoot declared, turning around to head through the camp entrance, but found his way blocked by Blizzardnose and a tall pale grey tom who looked somewhat hesitant to be there.

"Sorry, but that's not going to happen." Was it just her, or did the camp just get smaller? No, it was the ShadowClan cats, circling the patrol. Flashstar crouched, ready to pounce, and with a tip of his head, he yowled, "ShadowClan, attack!"

Chapter 34

It felt like fire invaded the air as ShadowClan attacked the ThunderClan cats.

The air became thick with the smoky fumes of anger, and Palepaw found herself surrounded by yowls and snarls, slashing claws and snapping teeth, as the heat of the battle claimed the camp.

"Palepaw! Run! You aren't ready for a battle! Go straight back to ThunderClan!"

It was Sorrelspots. Palepaw wanted to comply with her, she really did - she hadn't been attacked yet, the entrance was clear and she wanted nothing more than to bury her nose into her sister's fur - but it just felt wrong to leave her Clanmates when there was no way that they could win this fight.

"No, I'm helping you here!" She shouted back, not sure if the words would even reach her mentor; battle cries now filled the air, along with the scuffling of paws on soft, springy pine needles. She tried her best to block out the metallic, repulsive smell of blood that somehow overrode the thick stench of pine and rotting leaves.

She spun around, looking to see where she could help best. Sorrelspots was grappling with the long-legged pale grey tom from before, and seemed to be doing well despite her earlier show of fear. Wolfwhisker was fighting alongside his brother against Flashstar and a ginger she-cat with white paws, and didn't seem to be faring well; the ShadowClan leader, now seeming incredibly snake-like, lived up to his name as he lashed out like lightning, quickly scoring his claws against Thistleheart's flank before retreating to safer ground. She couldn't find Hazelshade in the crowd, but she could hear her furious yowl, echoing louder than the others. Shrewfoot, Kestreltail and Raventail were all fighting warriors alone, though while Shrewfoot and Raventail seemed to be doing well, Kestreltail was barely dodging Ratstone's blows that seemed to just keep coming. Swanfeather was nowhere to be seen.

She bunched up her haunches as she prepared to leap in to help her Clanmate, but before she could do so, she was knocked clean off her paws by a thick skull and a lot of force.

It felt like she was airborne for a moment, the area where she was hit instantly throbbing.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way," came a familiar voice, and for a moment Palepaw froze. *Was that Echopaw?*

But when a dark grey face and a pair of blue eyes peered down at her, she was relieved to see that her friend hadn't been the one to attack her. It was her brother, Ripplepaw. *They sound similar*, she realised suddenly. *Well, they are siblings, but they seem so different.*

She scrambled to her paws, claws quickly unsheathing- why hasn't they been unsheathed in the first place? She felt her fur bristle, and made no attempt to flatten it; anything that would make her look larger would be useful in this battle. "I'm not afraid of you, Ripplepaw," she hissed, eyes narrowing as the tom's tail twitched in irritation.

Ripplepaw seemed slightly annoyed. "Actually, while you were off dreaming of your kittypet Clanmates, I was made a warrior. I'm Rippleclaw now."

"Is Echopaw a warrior then? What's her name?" Palepaw suddenly felt a surge of happiness for the new warriors over the heart-pounding dread of having to fight in a battle.

But Rippleclaw didn't seem to share her enthusiasm. "Echopaw wasn't made a warrior. Only me." Palepaw was surprised at the tom's sadness. She'd assumed that he didn't really care that much for his sister, that he'd sided with his Clanmates in thinking that she was weird. *I guess he isn't just some monster,* she remarked to herself. "Because apparently she's not as deserving as me. Which obviously isn't true. She deserves the title as much as anyone else."

Palepaw wanted to agree wholeheartedly, but the fact that they were talking in the middle of a fully-blown battle meant that she felt slightly inclined to fight, too. She lunged for the older tom,

aiming a blow to his muzzle, but the tom only opened his jaws and bit down on the paw. Surprise flitted through her mind. *How did he even react that fast? And with such a strange move?*

She winced, retracting her claws and attempting to pull her paw away, only to find that the tom wouldn't let go. Sharp teeth dug into her paw, and as he began to tug she saw the crimson of blood begin to spread through her fur where he was biting.

She flung her other paw out blindly, luckily managing to strike his face, though she wasn't sure where. However, the new warrior's grip on her paw loosened for a moment, and she took the opportunity to rip her paw free, ignoring the sting as his teeth dragged through the flesh.

She lashed out again, but the tom dodged, sliding to one side. She made to spin, but he hooked her paws out from under her, tripping her up. *Sorrelspots was right,* she realised bitterly. *There's no way I could take on any of these cats!*

She began backing away, now very aware of what this tom could do to her. *Perhaps if I'm quick enough, I can--*

"ThunderClan, retreat! Everyone, just get out of here! We can't win this fight, but we can try to escape it!" It was Shrewfoot, who hastily grasped Palepaw's scruff and gently threw her in the direction of the camp exit.

Palepaw quickly scrambled to her paws and took off. *This time, I won't stay! Not if my Clan is coming too!* But Palepaw didn't bother to check if the rest of her imprisoned Clanmates, or their rescuers, were following. She didn't even bother to check where she was running, as long as it was in the direction of the shady oak trees looming far in the distance.

Her paws hardly touched the ground as she flew across the unfamiliar territory, running faster than she could ever recall moving in her life. Her side still throbbed, and her paw, sticky with blood now, still felt like she had those thorn-sharp teeth inside of it. She kept her head held up, despite how tempting it was to keep it down and not look at the eerie shadows that seemed to taunt her as

she sped past them.

She felt another cat hot on her heels, and turned back just enough to see the familiar tortoiseshell pelt of her mentor, and just behind her Shrewfoot's slightly murky green eyes. Relief rippled throughout her pelt, though it was still largely blocked out by the rush of adrenaline she still felt from the battle.

"Don't look back. Just keep running. Well be back on ThunderClan territory quickly if we keep up this speed." It was Shrewfoot's authoritative voice, cool and commanding in her ear. She realised that he'd sped up so that he was racing alongside her, his thick fur seeming to barely move despite their speed. She quickly snapped her head forward as he overtook her, and she was grateful to not be leading the "patrol" of many warriors. She fell into step with Sorrelspots, whose breathing was ragged and shallow. *I hope she's alright,* Palepaw thought nervously.

It felt like Palepaw had been running for moons before Shrewfoot finally slowed his pace. It was then that Palepaw noticed the change in scenery; pines and firs had become oaks and sycamores, and the ground no longer felt uncomfortably springy and damp. The faint crinkling of old leaves underpaw echoed.

Shrewfoot drew to a stop quickly. "Are we all here?" He asked, eyes taking in the cats before him. Palepaw turned to do the same.

Sorrelspots seemed to be relatively unharmed, with just a small scratch along her muzzle. Hazelshade had a long wound running from her ear to her flank, though it was barely bleeding. Wolfwhisker's muzzle had been scratched, and his left ear was torn badly. Swanfeather had a wound on his neck that seemed like it could have killed, had it been slightly deeper, and scratch marks down one side. Raventail's black fur hid any wounds, but she could see that one of his paws was staining the ground below them.

Kestreltail was the worst off out of everyone; a deep gash sliced right across an eye, and from her throat dribbled blood from evident bite marks. Upon seeing her sister in the condition, Sorrelspots let out a strangled cry and rushed over, making it to her side just before the tabby collapsed.

Palepaw felt sick. She'd never seen this much blood. Sure, there had been times where she'd bitten Sunflame or Moonpaw too hard, or accidentally unsheathed her claws in the excitement of a mock battle, but nothing had ever been serious then. As she took in the warriors before her, defeated and downhearted and terribly wounded, she just wanted to look away.

There was something else, too: the ShadowClan cats had clearly intended not just to send a message with their fighting. The fatal wounds on Swanfeather and Kestreltail made it clear that they had intended to take lives in that fight.

A gasp echoed around them. "Where is Thistleheart? Where is my son?"

Swanfeather weaved around the cats, padding closer to where they had just come from. His tail hung limp, and now that he was facing away from her she could see more scratches down his hind legs, blood staining his tail. As he realised that his eldest son wasn't with them, his ears flattened.

The white tom spun around. "I'm going back," he announced. The determination in his eyes was forced, and Palepaw was willing to bet her next meal that it was because the most likely outcome to the situation was the worst. "I'm not leaving my son alone in the hands of an enemy Clan. He's still alive there, and I'm going to find him and help him back over here." Immediately Palepaw felt the air shift, as if everyone suddenly became a lot tenser and more uncomfortable. *Swanfeather's always been such a calm cat. I may not know him well but he's like a grown-up Wolfwhisker, from what I've seen. If seeing him so agitated startled me, how must the cats who have known him forever feel?*

A quick glance towards Hazelshade showed that her guessing was correct; Swanfeather wasn't acting normal. The tabby-and-white she-cat's eyes glistened with sympathy, and she seemed ready to speak some kind words to the evidently panicking tom.

Shrewfoot immediately took a step forward, his tail swishing cautiously. "Swanfeather, I know you want to save your son, but isn't it too risky? Besides, it's highly likely that-"

"Don't talk about him that way. Thistleheart is a strong warrior. He's survived this fight, and I'm going to get him." Palepaw watched incredulously as the white tom began racing back across the border, ignoring the protesting calls of his deputy.

The patrol seemed to be in a state of shock. Had Swanfeather, the cat known for his obedience and wisdom, really just shrugged off his deputy like that?

It was silent for a while, before Wolfwhisker spoke up. "I think it's best if some of us accompany him. Raventail, Shrewfoot, will you come with me?" The gleam in the young tom's eyes was so desperate that even the deputy, whose paws seemed so adamant to stay where they were, nodded shortly. Raventail didn't say a word as he joined Wolfwhisker.

Shrewfoot turned to the four cats remaining as the other two toms followed Swanfeather. "Sorrelspots, Hazelshade. Please make sure that Kestreltail and Palepaw get back safely. May StarClan guide you home." *Hey! I could make my way back safely on my own! I don't need an escort. I'm not a kit!* With that, he took off after the others, leaving the four she-cats alone. The image of his serious face, scarred from previous battles and fresh with the blood of this one, dull eyes glassy and almost lifeless, etched itself into her mind.

Palepaw found herself trailing behind the other cats as Hazelshade and Sorrelspots shared the weight of Kestreltail between them. The wounded tabby was conscious, but her paws seemed to stumble on everything they could find. She wondered briefly if she should help, but her injured paw had started throbbing again. *I guess now that the battle's over, our bodies finally have a chance to realise what's been done to them.*

As the pain quickly became unbearable, Palepaw raised her paw up, and while her speed slowed, the relief was worth the extra energy she had to put into keeping up.

Blood rushed in her ears as the energy she'd spent in the battle, fueled by adrenaline, quickly left her. She found her eyes drooping despite the bitter cold and the throbbing in her paw, her paws stumbling occasionally as she fought the wave of exhaustion

crashing over her.

She forced herself to stay alert by tuning into the reassuring words of Hazelshade to the two sisters in front of her. She had hardly heard Kestreltail's whimpering as it had started just seconds ago, but it made her flinch back, the sound so agonized that Palepaw considered burying herself under the leaves and waiting until the others had left.

"Don't worry," the older she-cat murmured to the injured warrior. "We'll be back soon." And, shooting a sly look towards Sorrelspots, she added, "And Wolfwhisker will be fine, Sorrelspots. He's a great warrior."

Instantly her mentor's hanging head snapped up as she fixed Hazelshade with a glare. "I don't like Wolfwhisker," she snapped, making both Palepaw and Kestreltail jump. The irritation in her eyes surprised Palepaw; her mentor had never seemed so angry. Then she reprimanded herself. *Sorrelspots is literally helping her injured sister - injured only because she had come to save her - get back to camp. If I had to do the same with Moonpaw, I don't think I could stay calm, either.* The image of her sister, wounds sliced down her body, flitted through her mind, and she had to shake her head to rid it off the awful thought.

Hazelshade just nodded, eyes gleaming with emotions that Palepaw found hard to read. "If you say so." Her voice quietened as she turned to Palepaw. "Are you alright? That was your first battle. Where are you hurt?"

The sudden questions made her blink. Gingerly she moved each of her limbs, but found that it was only her paw and her side, where Rippleclaw had knocked her, that hurt. "I'm alright," she replied, trying to sound as casual as possible to avoid worrying anyone. "Just my paw."

Hazelshade nodded silently, then resumed her murmuring, but only for a short while; the ThunderClan camp entrance lay before her. Never had a sight been so welcome to her weary eyes than the thorn wall surrounding camp.

She quickened her pace, a sudden burst of energy from seeing her home flowing through her veins.

When they reached the top of the camp, she waited for the warriors to enter first, Kestreltail gently hobbling along, aided by the supporting shoulders of the other two, before limping after them.

As soon as she entered the camp, she was suffocated.

Not by dirt or sand or smoke.

By thick, golden fur.

"Palepaw! You're back!" The relieved cry of her father echoed around the camp. Instantly, cats who had seemed to doze off around the camp- where they had likely been waiting for them- leapt up and, upon seeing the returning cats, began to swarm around their Clanmates, their voices loud.

"You're back! Are you okay?"

"Wait, there are only four of you!"

"Where are the others?"

A familiar yowl cut through the air, silencing the crowd.

She ripped her head out of Sunflame's pelt, coughing slightly, and he stepped back, tail flicking apologetically, before he began grooming her dust-covered pelt.

Bumblestar approached the returning group, and upon reaching them, he instantly pressed his muzzle against Hazelshade's, purring a warm welcome. She rubbed against him briefly, before stepping back.

"We had to fight," she reported. Unsurprised yet upset murmurs spread across the camp. "We managed to escape, but Thistleheart wasn't with us. He..." She shook her head. "Swanfeather insisted they go back for him. The others went with him."

"I'm so glad you're back and alive," the leader murmured, though

the news had clearly disturbed him. His ears lay flat against his head, and his tail flicked in agitation.

A moment later, the leader was abruptly knocked to the side by Silverleaf. "Move out of the way, you big lump of fur. I have patients. That goes for you too," she snapped at a vacant Sorrelspots, who still stood next to her sister. At first, the tortoiseshell glared at the medicine cat, but she quickly lost her anger and stepped to the side, sitting down a few mouse-lengths away and staring numbly at the ground below her.

Amberblaze soon joined her father in comforting their kit, and irritated Palepaw to no end by smothering her with licks. "You really gave us a scare, not returning like that!" Her mother's voice was light, but that was forced; her voice faltered at the end of her sentence, quivering slightly.

She lightly shoved them to the side, ears flattened in embarrassment. "I can groom myself, you know," she muttered, and began to do so, carefully twisting her head without putting her injured paw on the ground so she could reach her back. At one point, however, her other paw slipped, and she slammed her first one down to keep herself from falling. Instantly, a bolt of pain shot up her lower leg and she retracted it quickly with a squeak. The throbbing quickly worsened with the sudden pressure, and she found herself unable to open her eyes, her face etched into a permanent wince.

Luckily for her, Whitepool had heard her, and the other medicine cat's scent quickly greeted her senses as a cool tongue began cleaning the bloodied paw. The relief that the touch brought with it allowed her to open her eyes, and she watched silently as the white cat dressed her wound quickly, with the speed of a rabbit.

Before long she found herself sat on the ground with a paw wrapped in cobwebs and reeking of some strong-smelling flower juice. It wasn't an unpleasant smell, though, so she found herself quickly growing accustomed to it.

"Palepaw." The voice made her jump. She turned her head quickly to the side to find Silverleaf staring at her. "Finally! I was beginning

to think you were as vacant as your father, and that's saying something. Can you wake up Moonpaw? We'll need her help."

Suddenly remembering her sister - and feeling bad for not thinking of her sooner - she leapt to her paws, forgetting momentarily that she had a wound around her paw. She lifted it back up again and began hobbling over to the apprentices' den. The soft sound of even breathing drifted out of the entrance, and Palepaw remembered her exhaustion. She shook back the tired feeling building behind her eyes and made her way around the other apprentices' nests, "accidentally" stomping on Thistlepaw's tail in the process (and causing a satisfactory yelp), as she made her way to her sister's white body.

It only took a gentle prod to rouse the she-cat, though longer for her to actually wake up. After a few seconds, a pair of bright yellow eyes opened slightly. Upon seeing her, Moonpaw's ear flicked welcomingly. "Hi, Palepaw."

Then, her sister seemed to remember where Palepaw had just been. She leapt to her paws and shoved her face against her sister's, a relieved purr cracking from sleep roaring in her throat. Palepaw found herself stepping into the depths of Moonpaw's thick fur, eagerly accepting the warmth it had to offer. "I'm back," she mumbled, her voice muffled by the thick white fluff.

Moonpaw's purr stopped as she scented the air. "Blood. Oh. That's not good." She paused, tilting her head momentarily. "And... Right. I'm a medicine cat. Almost forgot. Sorry." She stepped back, looking her sister over. Upon seeing the dressed paw, her sister's ears flattened, and she raced out of the den, accidentally stumbling on Thistlepaw's tail on the way out. Palepaw couldn't help but laugh at the growl that the grey tom gave, even in his sleep.

As much as Palepaw wanted to curl into her den, she felt like she should wait for her Clanmates to return; they had saved her, after all.

Just as she left the den, Swanfeather and Wolfwhisker stumbled into the camp, followed closely by Shrewfoot, Raventail and--

Oh.

The nauseous feeling that had washed over her multiple times that night returned, stronger than ever. She'd seen the injured cats that had returned with her from ShadowClan, but this...

Stretched across Shrewfoot and Raventail's backs was Thistleheart, and he definitely wasn't moving.

Chapter 35

A few cries broke out simultaneously at the sight; Willowpetal, who had been padding around snapping at cats (likely her way of keeping calm, Palepaw thought with faint annoyance), Spottedrose, whose gaze had been glued to the entrance as she anxiously awaited the return of her mate, and Aspenfall, who had been sat with Spottedrose as she waited for her two brothers to return.

Instantly, Wolfwhisker went to his littermate's side, burying his nose into her silver fur. Beside them, Spottedrose dashed over to Thistleheart's body, wordlessly gaping at it, the cry that had split the air stuck in her throat.

Willowpetal also moved to her son's side, though she showed no emotion other than tenderness as she gently pressed her nose to his cheek. Through all the commotion in Palepaw's brain, she still found it in her to be surprised at Willowpetal's show of affection; not once had she seen the warrior share tongues, nor initiate any kind of physical contact for that matter, with any cat.

Swanfeather stared dully at his mate and son, a fox-length away. Instantly, Palepaw knew why he was keeping his distance. *He blames himself for Thistleheart's death.* A great sympathy pooled in her heart for the senior warrior. She silently cheered on Sunflame as her father padded to the tom's side, nudging him gently and murmuring something to him. Swanfeather nodded silently, and the two toms headed out of the camp once more. Palepaw just caught the words "burial" and "grave" from Sunflame as the two toms passed Bumblestar, who nodded silently.

As if triggered by the movement, Willowpetal abruptly stood straight and stalked into the warriors' den, ignoring the surprised stares of other cats as she left her dead son's body in the middle of the clearing without a trace of emotion.

For a time, the only noise filling the clearing was the racking sobs of Spottedrose, having laid down beside her mate, head buried in

his neck fur.

A moment later, Whitepool padded over, carrying a single stem of a small-leafed herb. She murmured some soft words to the young queen, which were instantly rejected, sharp blue eyes quickly averting back to her mate. However, the medicine cat gestured to Spottedrose's swollen stomach with her tail, speaking in the same hushed tone once more, and when she'd finished, the white and golden she-cat grasped the stalk in her teeth and ate it, before turning back to the body before her. The noise gradually began to subside until she lay as still as the dead warrior beside her.

Shrewfoot, after having his wounds checked and dressed, padded over to Bumblestar, who sat near Thistleheart's body, eyes glassy and unreadable. "We found him in the camp. The cats we'd fought were having their wounds treated, and they hadn't set a guard. We were spotted on the way out by an apprentice but she let us go."

A short burst of excitement overrode the disgust in Palepaw's mind. *That's Echopaw! No doubt about it!* The thought of her friend helping ThunderClan worried her, but warmed her at the same time.

The leader simply nodded, and Palepaw wasn't even sure if he'd heard. Her excitement was gone without a trace as she watched Shrewfoot dip his head respectfully, then make his way to the warriors' den, brushing gently against Wolfwhisker as he passed him, as if he were trying to comfort the grieving young tom with the accidental touch.

"Where is Cherryblossom?" Bumblestar's calm voice split through the newfound silence, making Palepaw jump. She turned to the leader to see that he was talking to Ashcloud, who looked as shaken up as the rest of his Clanmates.

The grey tom, whose blue eyes had been fixed on his dead Clanmate with a fierce intensity, turned to his leader. "Still asleep," he replied, his voice alarmingly quiet. *He's a calm cat, but he at least makes his voice heard normally.* Usually, he would have spoken to Bumblestar like it was an honour to be addressed by the Clan leader.

"Fetch her. I hate to bring this upon her, but she is better off knowing sooner that he is..." Bumblestar trailed off awkwardly, and Ashcloud nodded silently, looking a bit awkward himself as he turned away and headed to the warriors' den.

The thought of seeing another heartbroken cat made Palepaw want to wail herself. Without a word, she shuffled back into the den, not even bothering to step on Thistlepaw again as she found her way to her nest.

She settled herself down gently, though just as she did so, another wail sliced through the ominous air around the camp, filled with more excruciation than the others, if that were even possible.

Flattening her ears against Cherryblossom's wailing, she found sleep shockingly quick to claim her, and she welcomed it, eager to have the dull ache pushing throughout her entire body quenched.

Fueled by the devastating events of that night, Palepaw was plagued by nightmares.

~

What is your favourite scene or event so far in the book? (You may include Rising Sun in this, as well.)

Chapter 36

It was late in the morning when Moonpaw awoke from her sleep, though she felt refreshed. She lifted herself to her paws, stretched briefly, then sat down to groom her pelt.

As she did so, she found the scent of stale blood impossible to ignore. She turned to where it was coming from to see Palepaw curled up in her nest, which was next to Moonpaw's.

The events of the day before rushed to her as she took in her sister's pale golden fur, which was matted with clumps of blood, even though it had evidently been groomed. She forced the surfacing images of the dead tom to the back of her mind, setting it next to the memory of the many wounds on Swanfeather's legs, and on Kestreltail's face, which had scared her so much that she'd fallen over. *So much blood, and Silverleaf had already patched her up with cobwebs...*

Her sister sneezed in her sleep suddenly, making her jump. With an inward smile, she moved over to Palepaw and began working through her fur, tugging out bits of debris that must have come from the forest as they returned, cleaning the blood off of her sides and carefully cleaning around her wounded paw.

As she got a closer look at it, she saw deep punctures where teeth had been around the little paw, not on it, as if a cat had put their whole mouth around it. The image of Palepaw trying to shake off a fully grown ShadowClan warrior from her paw like it was a fly made her laugh out loud, though she quickly silenced herself as she heard stirring in a nest behind her.

Turning her head to find out who it was, she found her spirits lifting as she noticed Owlpaw sitting up. Though the tom hadn't spoken to her much, he and Ivypaw seemed to enjoy spending time with Palepaw. She'd heard that he was good at telling jokes.

"Morning," she chirped to him. *I really am feeling braver than usual,*

she mused to herself. Owlpaw jumped briefly, though when he saw her sitting there he purred a reply, shaking clumps of moss out of his thick pale pelt.

"You seem oddly cheerful for such an ominous cat," he noted playfully. Moonpaw inwardly winced, but flicked her tail in response in a way that she hoped could be perceived as a nice gesture. *He may have been joking, but does anyone really think that I'm 'ominous?'* The purr that had risen in her throat stopped, and she silently resumed grooming her sister.

A brief glance towards the tom that was definitely still there for some strange reason made her feel guilty. He seemed to be trying to find something to say, but evidently couldn't find anything.

Upon seeing Palepaw in her nest, however, his ears pricked, tail giving a happy swish. "She's back!" He cheered, trotting over to the two sisters.

At that exact moment, Palepaw woke up. She blinked open her blue-grey eyes, then upon seeing to two faces in front of her blinked again in confusion. "Um... Can I help you? Why are you in my face?"

Owlpaw jumped back a fox-length, landing on Thistlepaw. *That poor tom,* she chuckled to herself. *Not only does Palepaw walk all over him when given the opportunity but now he's got his brother falling over his paws!* Of course, she didn't exactly feel sympathetic.

Upon being rudely awoken, Thistlepaw heaved himself to his paws, focusing bleary eyes on the two she-cats, not seeing the ruffled pelt of his brother who stood next to him, looking relatively guilty. "If I actually cared about your well-being, I'd warn you to never do that again." *But it wasn't either of us!* "But honestly, I couldn't care less about what happens to you." With that, he spun around and stalked out of the den, almost knocking into Ivypaw as he passed. "Watch where you're going!" He snapped at his sister, who headbutted him gently in response.

"Good morning to you too," she retorted, before padding into the den. Upon seeing the last three apprentices in the den awake, she

flicked her tail in greeting. "Morning!" She padded over, nudging her brother to his paws. "Palepaw, you're stuck here for the day, Moonpaw, you're being summoned by that ferocious badger in the medicine den - though I've heard some refer to her as Silverleaf - and Owlpaw, you and I are going hunting. Cherryblossom and Swanfeather... They're not fit to travel after whatever happened last night. Shrewfoot said he would be taking us, and assessing our progress. Oh, and Thistlepaw and Lilypaw will be coming too, with their mentors, but they'll be working separately."

At that, Owlpaw visibly perked up, though a moment later his head tilted in confusion. "What happened last night? The cats getting stuck in ShadowClan? They're back now, aren't they?"

Oh. He doesn't know. I would've thought that everyone would wake up to that noise. She then scoffed quietly to herself. *It's not like I did, though.*

Palepaw spoke up. "Long story short, Thistleheart was on the rescue party to fetch us back. When we fled, he wasn't with us, so Swanfeather, Shrewfoot, Wolfwhisker and Raventail went to get him. He was dead." At the brief summary, Owlpaw's ears flattened.

"Swanfeather lost his son, Cherryblossom lost her brother. How is Spottedrose feeling, then?" Moonpaw's eyes darted over to where Thistleheart's body had been that night, only to find it gone, leaving bloodstains that had been scrubbed at with wet moss - Moonpaw knew as she was the one having to scrub it - but hadn't faded.

She failed to realise that all eyes were on her until her sister nudged her. "Oh. Um. Hi. What? Oh yeah. Spottedrose. Well, she's fine. I think." Upon the curious looks she was given, she realised something was wrong with what she'd said. "Um. No, she's not?" More strange looks. "I don't know. I'm not a mind reader, and even if I was, I don't know where she is."

Palepaw sighed, shaking her head in amusement. "Moonpaw? Remember that Spottedrose is - was - Thistleheart's mate?"

Oh. *Oh.* That made sense. Why would they be asking about a random cat? *I really should have remembered that.* "In that case, she's

probably not fine. I didn't talk to her, so I don't know what she's going through."

Palepaw shrugged, just when an annoyed yowl echoed around camp. *That's Silverleaf. Oops.* "I have to go," she said quickly, before racing off. Somewhere along the way, she mentally shoved herself. *That was your first time to be included in a group conversation. Good job on messing it up.*

Upon reaching the den, Moonpaw braced herself. She had treated two cats on her own the previous night, and while they hadn't been serious and weren't in the den, she knew that some of the other cats that had been on the patrol were. There was Gingerheart too, of course, her wounds from the fox attack healing badly, her sleep conquered by nightmares that she refused to speak of.

"What are you lingering around out there for? Unless you became a kittypet overnight, you shouldn't be lazing around like that's all you're good for!"

She yelped as Silverleaf started scolding her, before padding through the bracken-bramble woven entrance.

It was cooler inside the den than outside, which wasn't a good thing; with leaf-bare on its way, everywhere was cold, even for Moonpaw and her thick, long fur. She shivered as she passed into the shade, her breath creating a small cloud in the air. *I wonder if real clouds look like that up close,* she thought, head instinctively raising to look at the sky. She'd already started looking for clouds when she remembered that she was actually in a den. *Oops.*

Again, Silverleaf's sharp voice snapped her out of her thoughts. "Moonpaw! There's nothing up there! Honestly, you're worse than usual today." *So are you,* she fired back in her mind. Her mentor usually had a hint of kindness in her retorts, but today there was none. *Not that I'd ever actually say that, though.*

Shaking herself to rid her thoughts of the non-existent clouds, she lowered her head and peered around the dark cave. Three cats occupied nests. Gingerheart was in the one closest to her, asleep on her side, a ragged leg twitching. Kestreltail was in the one just

behind the elder, her eye being examined by Whitepool, whose expression was grave. Finally, Raventail sat in the last nest, looking relatively frustrated as he glared at the ground in front of him.

She quickly snapped her attention back to Silverleaf when she realised that her mentor been talking to her. "... With marigold, but we've ran out, and we need to stock up since leaf-bare is just around the corner. Can you recruit a friend - or foe; it doesn't really matter to me as long as you get the job done - and get some more? Anything else you find along the way would be useful as well. Especially catmint. I'd like to stock up in case *someone* decides to be far too generous again."

Thank goodness I actually heard the part I needed to hear! She thought to herself, relief that she didn't have to ask her mentor to repeat herself *again* fluttering through her body. "Marigold. Leaf-bare. Other herbs. Catmint. Okay."

The older medicine cat dismissed her with a flick of her tail, then padded over to Raventail, not-so-gently lifting one of his paws and earning a sharp hiss in return. As she left the den, she couldn't hide the giggle that slipped out as she heard her mentor retort, "oh, shut it, you grumpy old crow."

As soon as she was out of the den, she began looking around for a cat to help with her task. Her parents both sat side by side, sharing tongues. She scoffed as she watched her father mutter something into Amberblaze's ear that caused her to double over in laughter, then embarrassedly sit back up straight and shove him affectionately.

Not wanting to interrupt what they were doing, she turned to the next cat she recognised that might not think she was weird; Hazelshade. However, she was in bad luck: Hazelshade was just leaving on a patrol with Rowanfur and Honeywhisker.

Oops, she thought to herself, sighing. *All the good cats have gone. Now I'm stuck with...*

There were only a pawful of cats still in the clearing; Bumblestar, who was sat below the highledge grooming his thick fur, her

parents, who were grooming each other, and... No, she wasn't going to acknowledge Thistlepaw's presence. *If it were a choice between a fox and Thistlepaw, I'd be asking if the fox's family would like to come along too.* Besides, he and a rather ragged-looking Wolfwhisker were just preparing to leave. They joined Lilypaw and Tawnywing and left the camp, with said she-cat apprentice bouncing around like she'd just been told that she would be the next deputy of ThunderClan.

Which left only one choice. Bumblestar. *Would he even want to collect herbs? Is he allowed? Do leaders do things like that? Do they have to stay in camp?*

"Just pick anyone! Honestly, I couldn't care less if you bring a fox, as long as it does the job!" Again, her mentor made her jump. *Can she read my mind?* She wondered, shooting a suspicious glance towards where Silverleaf was now beckoning with her tail for Moonpaw to speed up.

Bumblestar it is, then. Sucking up what little courage left she had, Moonpaw padded over to the leader.

Upon hearing her pawsteps, the leader's eyes cracked open, and he gave her a dip of the head. "Hi, Moonpaw. What can I help you with?"

"Friend," she blurted out the first word that she could think of, and instantly regretted it as Bumblestar's head tilted. "I mean. Um. I was supposed to bring a friend to help me collect herbs, but I have none. In this camp! Yes. In the camp. I do have friends. Just not here." *That was... appalling. I have nothing to say to myself.* Then she mentally replied to her inner voice. *Then again, I shouldn't be talking to myself, so maybe that's a good thing... -- Huh?*

The ThunderClan leader began to laugh. *Either I should be the Clans' designated jokester, he's weird, or I'm just so embarrassing. Likely the last one.* "Let me get this straight. Your *definitely* existent friends aren't here, and you've been asked to collect herbs. Your parents are too busy being in love to be disturbed, I'm not doing anything, and..." He squinted around the clearing, though like her, couldn't see any other cats. "There's no one else?"

This cat deserves an award, for interpreting my mess of words. "Yes. That's, uh... Yes."

With a purr, the leader got to his large paws. "I'd love to help," he replied, flicking his tail towards the camp's entrance. "Lead the way, Moonpaw."

Swallowing the butterflies inside her that seemed to love appearing whenever she spoke to an unfamiliar cat, she led the way up the camp slope to the entrance, her claws digging into the cold earth more for mental support than physical support. *If I fall backwards onto the ThunderClan leader, that's it for me!*

With that thought, she hurried along, scrambling through the entrance. Upon making it safely up - without falling on top of her leader - she cheered quietly.

"Did I miss something?" Bumblestar asked, tilting his head again. *He looks like a kit when he does that,* she mused to herself, giggling absently. It took her a moment longer to realise that the large tom was looking at her, and when she did, she shut up, glaring holes into the frosty grass. *Why did I laugh? He must think I'm the biggest creep in the Clan. No, in all the Clans!*

She forced her embarrassed line of thought into the corner of her mind. "Sorry. I, um... You look like a kit. When you tilt your head, I mean. Otherwise you look... Old. But not really old! Just... Kind of?"

The leader waved his tail at her. "Don't worry about it. Goldensun always used to tell me that no matter how much I grow, I'll always look like a kit sometimes. He was a good brother. For the most part, at least." Bumblestar's tail lowered slowly, and he turned away from Moonpaw's curious - and self-conscious - gaze. "I mean, the last thing he said when he left ThunderClan was that he would kill me..." He trailed off, staying silent after that.

And that cat is my grandfather? She wrinkled her nose at the thought of spending time with Goldensun rather than Bumblestar. *And Sunflame's father? And Bumblestar's brother?*

She realised that Bumblestar had come to a halt in front of a growth

of borage and was looking at her. "I thought warriors didn't know much about herbs," she muttered as she bent down to pick some of the purple-flowered plant. Of course, there were no flowers now; they had dropped off during greenleaf. She didn't miss Bumblestar's chuckle at her words.

"We need marigold," she told the leader. *This isn't going too bad. I'm speaking in proper sentences, and I sound a bit authoritative. Like I know what I'm doing, for once.* She felt herself perking up slightly. *Maybe this outing can be my first one that actually goes well.*

She grasped the borage stalks in her jaws and headed in another direction. "Do you know what marigold looks like?" She asked Bumblestar, not turning her head to look at him. The scent of WindClan wafted around her and she realised that they'd reached the border. *That was fast.*

"I do," came the leader's reply. "It's a herb I've been treated with at least a dozen times." *Oh... does he think I think he's stupid? I didn't mean it patronisingly! I should known that it would be a herb that every cat knows!* "Besides, Moonpaw, occasionally a medicine cat will teach their Clan basic herbs in case they die in a time of peril without an apprentice, or just for convenience, or if they're going on a quest, or to a battle, and won't have a medicine cat with them. I'm assuming that it's not happened for a while even though we've had a few fights because we have three medicine cats, but I suppose you can never be too careful."

Not knowing what to say, Moonpaw just nodded awkwardly and stayed silent, keeping her senses sharp for the familiar scent of marigold or its orange-yellow flowers. The only place she knew them to be was along the ShadowClan border, but she had avoided thinking about that patch for a while. *They're sure to grow elsewhere,* she reassured her worrying mind.

After a while, it became increasingly obvious that there was no marigold near the WindClan border. *I don't want to go anywhere near ShadowClan though,* she thought, swallowing. *But we need catmint, too. We'll have to go there.*

She began to stutter out an incorrigible sentence, but Bumblestar

cut her off. "ShadowClan?" He sighed, then nodded. "If we need the herbs, I suppose we'll have to. Just stick close and if anything happens, run. I don't want another cat dying at the claws of an arrogant young leader."

This time, Bumblestar led the way to ShadowClan, and for that she was grateful. *The last thing I want to do is accidentally cross the border in front of my leader.* She almost shuddered. *That could literally start a war.* The thought of that saddened her. *What have our Clans become? ThunderClan kits shouldn't have to grow up into a world of bloodshed.*

The majority of the journey was relatively quiet, with just the chirping of birds echoing across the crisp air. Leaves and frost crunched beneath her paws, though the sound would often stop, patches of ground touched by sunlight dotting the ground. Moonpaw found herself enjoying the journey, despite the bitter cold that coiled around her, and the fact that they were headed to arguably the most dangerous part of their territory.

As they neared, however, Moonpaw found her earlier contentment dipping. The clearing that held catmint was nearing, though she could already see the severe lack of the flat, thin leaves that greeted her the last time she had visited.

She sped up, eager to gather the catmint so she could get back to camp quicker. Upon actually entering the clearing, she noticed that multiple stems had been trimmed to almost nothing, leaving just a few stalks. *There were so many stalks here last time,* she recalled bitterly. *And we gave them away to ShadowClan?*

She quickly reprimanded herself afterwards. *They needed it. More than us, I should think, if Tansyfrost was telling the truth at the moonpool.* Flicking her tail towards Bumblestar to wait, she slid the borage off so it was sat by his paws, then began to pick the stems, careful to not take too many off of one plant; the last thing ThunderClan needed was their herb supplies to be wiped out because of their young medicine cat apprentice.

Once she'd gathered enough stalks - thankfully, there was still plenty left, despite leaf-bare looming over them like a ShadowClan

pine tree - she brought them over to Bumblestar, placing them down with the rest of the herbs. "The border isn't too far off," he said to her, "but there are lots of herbs here. It would make more sense for one of us just to quickly fetch the marigold. Do you want me to get it, or would you prefer to do it?"

Once again, Moonpaw considered it. *Bumblestar would certainly be safer there, but this was my job. I couldn't sit back and relax if he's doing the task I've been sent out to do.* "I'll go," she decided, swallowing the characteristic fear that had risen in her stomach.

Bumblestar nodded, sitting down. He pulled the stalks towards him with a sweep of his fluffy tail, then nodded to her. "I'll be here. Be careful. Remember, any danger, come straight back here."

I'm a medicine cat, not a kit, she muttered inwardly, but just returned the nod, then turned to where the pungent scent of pine and rotting leaves wafted from.

The border really wasn't far; a few fox-lengths and she could see the first pine trees. *And the marigold!* She cried inwardly, ears pricking eagerly as she raced towards the flowering plant.

The marigold had withstood the cold so far, but she could see the first browns on the leaves, and some of the flowers had barely any petals. Once again, she bent down and nipped at the stalks, though this time, she kept her gaze fixed in front of her, where the shadows seemed to threaten her.

So far so good, she thought, allowing a sigh of relief to escape her lungs. She'd gathered a few stalks, though she held back from taking more; the flowers were on their border, and Tansyfrost might need more. *Silverleaf won't feel the same way, though, but she doesn't have to know,* she added silently to herself.

She picked up the stalks that she'd picked, fitting the bundle into her mouth with some difficulty, then returned to Bumblestar. *With my luck, I have no idea how I wasn't attacked,* she thought to herself, scoffing quietly. *Although maybe I've spoken too soon and cursed myself.*

A rustle in the bushes in front of her made her jump, and she scrambled away quickly. She hid behind the nearest bush, a thick bramble, hardly daring to breathe as a patrol of ShadowClan warriors emerged. It was led by a white-flecked grey tom with scratches lacing his body and fiery eyes that scoured ThunderClan's territory as if looking for something. As his amber eyes passed over where Moonpaw crouched, she felt her throat tighten in fear. *If I get discovered, I'll be taken as a prisoner, like Palepaw was!*

Two she-cats emerged after him, one with a thick coat of white fur, one with short brown fur and many healed scars and a nicked ear. Both had green eyes. Bringing up the rear was a grey tom with thick fur and clear blue eyes that reminded Moonpaw of a Greenleaf morning. He had a scratch across his left cheek that parted his fur.

"What do you scent?" The white she-cat asked the thick-furred grey tom. Her voice was gentle, as if she were talking to a new apprentice. In response to that, he scowled at her, turning his head away.

"I'm a warrior now," he muttered. "You don't need to treat me like an apprentice." Though his voice was cold, Moonpaw could see that his eyes were warm as he took in the white cat. "But since you asked so nicely, there's a mouse scurrying around over the border. And--" He broke off, staring right at Moonpaw.

Ice surged through her veins, chilling her already shivering body to the core. He knew that she was there. *One word from him and I could become the next piece of prey to die in this forest.* "And?" The other tom prompted, his impatience evident as he all but pummeled the earth. "Any ThunderClan cats we can shred?"

After a long pause, during which Moonpaw thought she might explode, the tom turned his head. "Nothing. I thought I heard another mouse, but it was just my imagination. Sorry."

As soon as he'd said it, he gazed straight at Moonpaw, though his eyes weren't angry in the slightest. They held accusation in them, though it was more of a look of *look what you made me do* than *how dare you?* The breath that Moonpaw had been holding in came out quietly as the patrol moved on. She couldn't get the grey cat's eyes

out of her head. It was like two pools of rippling water had formed in her mind, and she couldn't remove them no matter how hard she tried.

When the patrol had moved away far enough, she shuffled out of her hiding place and sprinted back towards where Bumblestar was waiting, only to remember that she'd left her marigold by the brambles. She skidded to a halt, narrowly missing smacking into the trunk of a birch tree.

I don't want to go back to the border, she thought with a wince, *but I don't really have much of a choice now.* Swallowing the apprehension that had built up inside her once again, she made her way back to the border. When she found the place she'd been hiding, she was relieved to see that the small pile of marigold stems were still there.

"Hello, apprentice."

And, apparently, so was the grey tom.

Chapter 37

"Wait! I don't want to hurt you! Just to talk."

Moonpaw's immediate response was to run away. She made sure that she had a firm grip on her marigold leaves before spinning around and sprinting away.

... Straight into a tree.

She crashed rather unceremoniously into an oak tree head-first, which sent her toppling over sideways. Her whole body felt as if it were vibrating from the impact, making her nauseous.

She just lay there until the throbbing had stopped, which took a minute, before sitting back up, only to face the rather amused-looking tom. "Hello again," he chuckled. Moonpaw shot him a glare. *I get enough laughing from my own Clanmates*. "As I said," he continued, ignoring her look, "I just want to talk."

Since when does the enemy just want to talk? This is definitely going to end in my death, no matter how you look at it! She shook her head, then winced as the world swirled before her, causing her to see two of everything. *There was only one cat, right...? So who's that? His brother?*

"I've go to got," she replied distractedly. *I don't even care what a ShadowClan cat thinks of me,* she thought, *so I'll fail in speaking all I want.*

She ignored the tom's protesting noise as she grabbed the bundle of marigold that had toppled to the ground next to her when she'd hit her head and stumbled back to Bumblestar. *Weird tom,* she thought, wrinkling her nose.

Upon reaching Bumblestar, she flopped to the ground, closing her eyes, causing the leader, who had been pacing anxiously, to spin around in shock.

"Moonpaw! Are you okay?" He crouched down beside her, eyes round with concern. He tugged the yellow flowers out of her jaws, then nudged her cheek gently with his nose. "Are you hurt? Was it ShadowClan?"

She cracked open an eye. *I really don't want my leader to realise how much of a failure I am, but...* "I ran into a tree," she muttered.

Bumblestar was silent. *That's it. I can't be a medicine cat any more. He must have decided that I'm too clumsy!* And then he burst out laughing. *I seem to be very good at making others laugh,* she thought dryly. *Why is it that every time I leave the camp, I do something stupid and everyone else ends up laughing at me?* "Moonpaw! How did you..? You know what, don't worry about it. Let's just get you back to camp. I bet you feel like your head's rippling like the lake."

Relieved, she heaved herself back onto her paws. "I'll carry all the herbs," Bumblestar offered, and she gladly let him.

As they walked back, the amused, clear blue eyes of that ShadowClan cat haunted her mind. Had he really just wanted to talk? He had seemed genuine enough, no matter how hard she tried to change the image in her mind that she'd painted of him.

Immediately, she snapped at herself for thinking so, though. *He and his Clan stole my sister, killed one of our warriors, wounded others, constantly cross our borders, and never know when to shut up- though that last one is according to Palepaw. Although Echopaw did sound nice. Maybe I'll meet her one day. Tansyfrost didn't seem evil when I met her at the moonpool, either.*

Shaking that trail of thought out of her mind, she continued the rest of her already silent journey - Bumblestar had herbs in his jaws - in even more silence.

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As Moonpaw entered the camp behind Bumblestar, she noticed Shrewfoot, Wolfwhisker and Tawnywing waiting for them - no, waiting for Bumblestar.

"Oh, good, you're back," Shrewfoot meowed, relief evident in his voice.

Immediately, Bumblestar dropped the herbs - gently, and by Moonpaw's paws. "What's wrong? Is it Hazelshade? Palepaw? Spottedrose? Sunflame?"

The deputy shook his head. "No, they're all fine."

"So what's wrong?"

Another shake of his head. "Nothing. Actually, quite the opposite." He turned to the apprentices' den, where Pebblesplash's four kits sat, eating a piece of prey each. "They all passed their assessments. You have four new warriors. Well, if you perform the ceremony."

The leader let out a purr. "Well, that's a relief. We've had a lot of bad news lately. It feels like every time I enter camp, I'm swamped with yet another thing." The large tom trotted to the rocks that led to his den, bounding up them and standing on the Highledge.

"May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!"

Bumblestar's voice rang loud and clear throughout the clearing, and instantly cats began to gather. It was just past sun-high, and while the sun shone down upon the camp, it was still freezing. Moonpaw picked up the herbs that had been dropped by her paws, slinging the catmint over her back and attempting to fit both the marigold and the borage in her mouth and failing miserably.

In the end, she settled for carrying the borage on her back too; their stalks were a lot longer than the marigold she'd picked, so they'd be less likely to fall off. She wrapped her tail over them, to keep the large bundle stable, then shuffled over to the medicine den, careful not to drop any.

Once inside, she lowered her back to the ground, letting the herbs slide off, then dropped her own herbs onto the pile that had accumulated. *I don't want to miss the ceremony,* she thought worriedly, *but Silverleaf might have my head if I don't sort these.*

In the end, she settled with three piles to the side of the den before she rushed back out, careful not to step on Gingerheart's twitching tail as she passed her sleeping form.

Luckily for her, the ceremony hadn't proceeded too far. It seemed that Bumblestar was doing them all individually, but going down the line of apprentices. Lilypaw and Owlpaw seemed like they might burst with joy, so she assumed that they'd been named already.

She searched for a place to sit, but all the best spots had been taken up. She was about to just sit where she was, outside the medicine den, when she noticed Palepaw beckoning to her with her tail. Her sister had shuffled out of the apprentice den and was perched outside, her injured paw raised slightly.

Not wanting to disturb the meeting, she hurried over to her sister, sliding into place beside her. "What did I miss?" She asked, huffing; she'd just ran halfway across the clearing.

Palepaw bounced up and down. "Lilypaw is Lilypatch, and Owlpaw is Owlpounce," she whispered. "Oh, and now Thistlepaw is Thistlefrost. Bumblestar has picked out really cool names! I hope I get a nice warrior name!"

Palepaw had exclaimed her last sentence loudly, and several heads turned, but Bumblestar carried on with the meeting. Her sister ducked in embarrassment. "Sorry," she squeaked.

Moonpaw nudged her. "Nobody cares. They're probably used to it by now." She ducked when her sister swiped a sheathed paw her way, then returned to her sitting position as Bumblestar named Ivypaw.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Ivypaw, from this moment you shall be known as Ivymist. StarClan honors your enthusiasm and humour, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Instantly, cheers from all around overwhelmed Moonpaw. Palepaw joined in, enthusiastically calling the name of her friends. She even

exclaimed Thistlefrost's name a few times.

Should I be joining in? I don't know them very well, but it seems like I'm the only one who isn't cheering. In the end, after seeing even grumpy old Silverleaf - no, grumpy *young* Silverleaf, she corrected in her mind - cheering, she joined in, calling the four new warriors' names loud enough for StarClan to hear her.

After the noise had settled and Bumblestar had dismissed the Clan, Moonpaw returned to the medicine den, entering shortly after Silverleaf and Whitepool did. "Is there anything you want me to do?" She asked her mentor, watching as she placed the three piles of herbs into their places.

Silverleaf shook her head. "We've got nothing else to do for the rest of the day but watch Kestreltail and Gingerheart. You can get some prey and do what you want."

Her heart leapt. That was the first time she'd been dismissed early from duties. She dipped head to her mentor, then padded out into the cold sunlight.

After her eyes adjusted once again to the brightness of the camp, she allowed them to wander. The sun had moved on, and it began to dip below the trees that sheltered their camp. It meant that the camp was lined with dapples of shade. While it was pretty, it was also unwelcoming; with the cold that already rode the breeze, nobody would want to lose the sun on their pelts before they had to.

As Moonpaw had thought, no cat sat in the shade. It was the time that all the warriors shared tongues, and any lucky apprentice would be invited to converse with them. A large group of warriors sat in a semicircle next to the warriors' den, sharing words and prey. Beneath the highrock, Bumblestar and Hazelshade shared a blackbird, their pelts brushing. Swanfeather sat with Wolfwhisker, father and son, silent but clearly there to comfort one another. A patrol was leaving on a hunt, led by Sunflame.

It seemed so peaceful, especially with the soft melody of birdsong to accompany the murmur of movement around her. However, the

bitter cold and dark shadows served as a reminder that they still had the worst to come; they were only in their first moon of leaf-bare. She just couldn't shake off the feeling that it would be the last time that the Clan would be able to live this safely for a while.

Moonpaw's first instinct was to join her sister in the apprentices' den. However, she saw Ivymist and Owlpounce padding over to her and thought that it would be better if she left them alone.

So she went with her next option. One that greatly appealed to her.

The elders' den.

Chapter 38

As was usual for the elders' den in the evening, it was very welcoming, and surprisingly warm compared to everywhere else.

The sun dusted the ground with soft dapples of light, creating all kinds of shapes as it filtered through the bare branches of the fallen tree hanging above the entrance. The walls, woven with not just brambles but also clumps of moss - a new addition, an idea of Swanfeather's from a moon ago, and evidently what was keeping the den so warm - let in little of that light, though, so the only place tickled by the sun was an arch on the ground where the entrance was.

As soon as Moonpaw entered, a warm voice called her over. "Moonpaw! So great to see you. It's been far too long since you've visited us." Redfeather sat up and stretched stiffly, before settling at the side of her nest. She gently patted the spot next to her with her dark ginger tail, brown eyes warm. "Come here. I bet you're freezing, in this weather. I know I am."

Moonpaw eagerly padded over, sitting next to the larger she-cat. A relaxing warmth seeped into her as she settled down. It had indeed been a few moons since she'd seen the elders without a bundle of herbs to drop off and a grumpy Silverleaf breathing down her back, and she was glad to be back in the engulfing warmth of the cosy den.

"You've grown," Thrushwhisker noted. His dark green eyes, while bleary with sleep, took her in with enough warmth to rival that of the den. "I hope Silverleaf has been good to you. I know how stubborn and rude my daughter can be."

"Do you want a story?" Redfeather offered. Her gaze suddenly lit with amusement. "I could tell you about Firestar again. I know how you love our tales of him."

However, she shook her head. *I feel like I've overexerted Firestar. You*

can only hear the same account on the Great Battle so many times. "What else is there?"

"What about Dovewing and Ivypool? Now there's an interesting tale. You know, Sorrelspots and Kestreltail used to love hearing about them." Suddenly Redfeather's voice became wistful. "Those two used to come here all the time. Even as warriors, they would often spend their time just listening to the tales of those two sisters. That is, of course, until Sorrelspots had her kits."

What? When was that? "Sorrelspots had kits?" Moonpaw couldn't recall a time where Sorrelspots had been in the nursery, and she knew Sorrelspots wasn't much older than Sunflame.

Thrushwhisker nodded, his whiskers drooping. "She had three, two she-cats and a tom, though only one was born alive. Even he died in the night, though. Silverleaf and Kestreltail buried the she-cats, but she wouldn't let anyone else near her son, and insisted on burying him all by herself."

Curiosity got the better of her. "I never knew that." *Nobody's ever mentioned it. Are the elders making this up?*

But the genuine sadness in Redfeather's brown eyes told Moonpaw that Sorrelspots had indeed suffered the pain of losing her kits. "They were born two moons after you. Sorrelspots kept quiet about the whole thing. She never outright named a father, but if it isn't Wolfwhisker I'll bathe in fox dung; they used to spend all their time together. There was kind of an unspoken bond. I think their kits' deaths drove them apart, though. They aren't close any more."

"Come to think of it, she gave birth in the forest just outside camp, so it makes sense that you wouldn't have known. Sorrelspots was too weak to move, so some of the warriors made a nest around her." Thrushwhisker's head was tipped onto one side, as if it would help him remember. "She came back the next morning and nobody spoke of it to her. I guess we all figured that she'd want time to grieve."

An uncomfortable feeling settled on Moonpaw's chest. *I almost wish I hadn't heard that. Poor Sorrelspots...*

"Sunflame used to visit us, too, when he was a kit." Redfeather's sudden meow made Moonpaw jump. The elder's eyes were filled with warmth once more. "Sootface used to love telling them stories. Amberblaze had the best reactions, and Sunflame could never guess what was coming up next."

"Who is Sootface?" Moonpaw asked, confusion flitting around in her mind as she raked it, trying to figure out if she recognised the name.

"Of course, you never met her." Redfeather's eyes crinkled up with light. "She was an elder. She told the best stories in the best of ways. She always engaged kits, even ones with the attention span of a pigeon, and even warriors would still listen to her stories. She died during an attack on the camp from rogues. Apparently, they think it's funny to kill elders. Amberblaze's mother and littermates also died in that attack." *I didn't mean to come here and hear about death, but I guess that's what I get for asking questions that are too nosy!*

"He and Amberblaze would come in here, sometimes together, though more often than not it would just be one of the two. You could always tell that they were going to be mates, though. The way they acted around each other just screamed love." She chuckled suddenly. "If only he could've gotten it into his head sooner, though. Hazelshade had to intervene."

Thrushwhisker fluffed out his dark brown pelt, then began grooming it. "Hazelshade often went into the elders' den with Bumblestar, too. Not that we were elders at that point, though. In fact, Redfeather here was Hazelshade's mentor."

"She was the perfect apprentice," purred the dark ginger she-cat, her tail swishing happily, likely due to the remembrance of her warriorhood. "So enthusiastic, so kind. We were all surprised when she fell for Goldensun, though. She and Bumblestar were like two of a kind. They did everything together. Then again, I suppose it's not exactly surprising; Goldensun and Hazelshade were the two lookers in the Clan, the gold sun and the silver moon. They looked like they belonged together."

She shuddered. "Of course, that all changed when Goldensun killed her mother, Cinderstar. I think everyone was shocked. He was arrogant and ambitious, yes, but we never realised the lengths that he was willing to go to." She shook her head sadly. "Poor Bumblestar, too. Had his heart broken. He loved Hazelshade. Then his brother stole her away, then got himself exiled. He left his mate and kits, and poor Bumblestar felt like he should step in as a father. Not that Hazelshade let him do much, though."

She almost wanted to interrupt the elderly she-cat, but she got the feeling that even if she did, Redfeather wouldn't hear her. *Besides, nobody seems to like talking about Goldensun. This might be my only chance to learn about him.*

"She shocked everyone with how harsh she was to Sunflame when he was a kit. She didn't seem to want him anywhere near her, and even up until he was a warrior she stayed away from him as much as she could. It must've been hard on him. I suppose most of the Clan did the same, though. Willowpetal especially. She's always hated Goldensun, since she was a kit, though I'm not really sure why."

Thrushwhisker dusted the ground beside him with his tail, as if trying to find something to do. *He doesn't seem like the type of cat to sit down and enjoy doing nothing,* she mused to herself. "Well, that's all sorted out. Hazelshade was only rude because she couldn't bear to look at him - a splitting image of him killed her mother, so it's understandable, though that certainly didn't make it the right thing to do - but she always loved him. Goldensun came back, seemed changed. Left with Ivyfrost and Breezestorm, another two cats who were supposedly traitors. Bumblestar and Hazelshade are mates."

"I didn't know that last part." She had never heard the two say it, but it had been obvious that something was going on between them, what with all the time they spent alone together. *I suppose I should have noticed,* she thought. *I'm happy for them, though. After hearing what Bumblestar went through, he deserves this happiness.* "I think it was obvious, though."

Redfeather nodded, then turned her head to peer at the den entrance. "Well, it's been lovely talking to you, Moonpaw, but it

would seem that you're being summoned by an even greater force."

"Huh?" She sat up straight, turning to her head to the entrance, almost expecting to see Silverleaf waiting for her. However, she was pleasantly surprised to see the familiar golden pelt of her sister. "Oh! Hello."

Palepaw waved her tail at her, beckoning her over. "I didn't know you were back! It's been so boring."

Moonpaw climbed to her paws, then padded to her. "Poor you, having to lie there and do nothing all day. I bet you're just so exhausted from all the *nothing* you've done."

Palepaw looked surprised - I *suppose I usually keep those kinds of retorts to myself, don't I?* - but she scoffed quickly after. "I don't see you hard at work here," she fired back teasingly. "What have you been doing that is so exhausting?"

As they began walking back to the apprentices' den, Moonpaw waved her tail to the elders, who returned the gesture warmly. "Well, I went herb gathering."

Palepaw's ears pricked. "Oh! How did it go?" Her sister's enthusiasm made her scoff. *Just you wait.*

"I spoke to a ShadowClan warrior," she whispered, feeling a flush of delight as her sister jumped in surprise, which was quickly overridden by guilt as her sister landed on her bad paw and winced.

"You *what?*" Palepaw seemed shocked. "Really? You're not making it up?" As Moonpaw gave her sister a mock-hurt look, she quietened down. "Sorry. I just can't imagine you actually talking to one of them."

The fake hurt became suddenly very easy to show. *Even my own sister thinks I'm a bit cowardly, huh?* "Just keep it down," she muttered, glancing around. Luckily, the only cats who were around to listen were Bumblestar and Hazelshade, sharing tongues beneath the Highledge. *Well, they're definitely in their own world. I've never seen Goldensun, but I don't know if even he can beat the way those two*

look together. With Hazelshade's pretty silver tabby pelt and Bumblestar's soft, pale ginger fur, the two looked like a sunset rippling on the lake.

"Why? There's nobody around to hear."

She jumped out of the pretty scenery in her mind only to find her sister staring at her. "There are cats in their nests, and Bumblestar and Hazelshade are over there. ThunderClan thinks I'm weird as I am already," she muttered.

But her sister shook her head. "You know, cats don't really think you're weird. Bumblestar and Hazelshade seem to adore you. Then there's our parents, of course. There are definitely cats who like you. Ashcloud may have seemed annoyed at you for becoming Silverleaf's apprentice, but he definitely doesn't think that you're weird, and I don't think Sorrelspots does, either." She paused, trying to remember something. "Oh, and Ivymist thinks you're pretty."

Embarrassment squirmed in her stomach as Palepaw listed off the cats. *How can she be so sure that I'm accepted here? I feel completely out of place.* But she shrugged the feeling off. *I'll trust her for now.*

"And there's me! I'm your best friend, right?"

"Of course!" She replied instantly. *Palepaw is the only cat who I can relax around. She might know how strange I am, but she doesn't care. She loves me for who I am.*

They had reached the apprentices' den a while ago, though neither had dared to enter. *It will be just us tonight,* Moonpaw realised. The thought of the empty den sent a shiver down her spine. *I may not have been great friends with any of the four siblings, but they certainly made the den lively.*

Palepaw was the first to enter, though Moonpaw followed soon after. It was a lot darker than the elders' den, though that was likely because of its location in camp. The fact that it was cold came down to the gaps in the den wall; where the elders' den's walls had been filled in, cracks in the apprentices' den still remained. However, it was still warmer than outside, so Moonpaw found herself flattening

her fur.

The first thing Palepaw did was gather up all the old moss and pile it onto one big heap in the middle of the den. "They won't need it anymore," she told her sister as she climbed on top of it, "So why don't we have it for tonight? As a celebration of getting our own den for a few moons."

Moonpaw giggled as her sister flopped onto her side on top of the heap, though didn't join her. "If you want a nest reeking of Thistlefrost, go ahead. I think I'll just stick to my own."

Her sister froze, looked at the moss below her for a moment as if it were a dead badger, then shrugged. "It's comfortable. Besides, it smells more of Ivymist and Lilypool."

"Then again," Moonpaw added teasingly, choosing to ignore Palepaw's reply, "if I recall correctly, you're always gazing at Thistlefrost. No wonder you don't mind his stench in your nest."

Her sister immediately shot to her paws. "It's called glaring! And I *do* mind!" She reached down with her muzzle, pulling out a large bundle of moss. "You seem to like talking about him so much, so you have it!"

She ducked as her sister tossed the moss her way, scoffing as it landed behind her, likely outside of the den. "You missed."

"Actually, she didn't," came a muttered reply. Moonpaw spun around to see Amberblaze - or, what was left of her to be seen. The moss had landed on her head and shoulders, covering sleek black fur. She stepped aside quickly as their mother came into the den.

Palepaw slid down the pile and next to her mother. "Sorry!" She reached out to take it off but Amberblaze jerked her head forward suddenly, flinging the moss onto her daughter's head. "Hey! That's not fair!" Palepaw protested, shaking her head to remove the moss. "How was I supposed to know that you would-- hey, are those for us?"

Moonpaw realised that their mother was carrying two mice. At the

sight of them, her mouth began to water. *I bet I could eat both of those.* But she knew that with the worst of leaf-bare around the corner, she would be lucky to eat anything.

"They are. This leaf-bare has been kind to us so far. Sootface used to say that StarClan was waiting for us to prepare, because the worst leaf-bare in a while was coming. She was an elder when I was a kit," she clarified for Palepaw, who had begun forming the question on her tongue.

She set the mice down, waved a goodbye to her daughters with her tail, then padded away.

"Well," Palepaw muttered, still trying to shake off bits of Thistlefrost-moss, "at least we got food."

She crouched down and began eating the mouse, so Moonpaw did the same. *Thank you, StarClan, for providing us with this prey,* she thought gratefully as she bit into the deliciously salty flesh. *It's still warm,* she realised, delight blooming within her. *That always seems to make everything so much more tasty.*

Unfortunately, the mouse only lasted a few seconds, but she was glad for aftertastes as she swiped her tongue around her muzzle, eager to catch any remaining scraps. "That was delicious," she murmured, closing her eyes and sitting down, then sighing in pleasure.

She watched as Palepaw once again hobbled up the lump of moss, then lay on top, closing her eyes. "It's going to be great. Sharing a den with just you, I mean. We can stay up late, talk for as long as we want, play games, and-- wait, are you going to sleep already?"

Moonpaw had climbed into her own nest and was curling up. She'd just closed her eyes when Palepaw had spoken in a tone of accusation. "No," she mumbled sarcastically. "I was closing my eyes because I want to stay wide awake all night."

Palepaw shrugged. "Weird way of doing it if you ask me." But she herself curled up, head resting on top of her tail.

It was silent for a few more moments before Palepaw spoke again. "How long until Rosekit and Thornkit become 'Paws?"

With a shrug, Moonpaw wrinkled her nose. "A moon or two. I don't know." *Those two kits are two cowardly for their own good. Well, at least Rosekit is. Thornkit is like a rude elder already; he snaps at some cats, glares at everyone and seems colder and sharper than an icicle.* However, even she couldn't deny that the absolute devotion he had to his sister was adorable. If she wanted anything, he'd instantly get it for her. If she was doing something bad he'd say it was his fault. *Maybe he's not so bad after all,* she thought. She hoped so, if she was going to be sharing a den with them.

Finding her eyes once again drooping shut, she couldn't stay focused on what her sister was saying. All she knew was that it was something about all of the fun things she was going to do with the new apprentices. It wasn't soon after her sister had stopped talking that she fell asleep, feeling as if she'd been wrapped up in a bundle of warmth. Just before she entered her dreams, however, two clear blue eyes pierced her mind, but she just couldn't place where they were from.

~

In this chapter, you learned a few things about cats that you didn't know before, like Sorrelspots' dead kits, and an insight into the history of Hazelshade, Bumblestar and Goldensun. What character's backstory are you interested in learning about?

Also, apologies for the uneventful chapter!

Chapter 39

It was peaceful in the ThunderClan camp.

Dozens of different birds chirped in the treetops, creating a melodical wake-up call to the camp that prepared for the crisp day ahead. One particular blackbird decided to circle the camp, singing a harmonious series of notes that sounded sweet on the ear.

Like all the days before this one, the sun perched on the horizon of bare trees, clouds nowhere near it. In fact, if it weren't for heavy clouds looming in the distance, it would have promised another day of warmth.

The warriors below murmured to one another, organising themselves into the patrols they had been assigned to. They created the bass notes for the birds' melody, entwining all the noises of the forest and gently tugging them into one set piece.

Of course, Palepaw snored through all of that.

It was only when her mentor gently shook her that she cracked open her eyes and muttered, "I'm up, I'm up."

With a groan, she heaved herself to her paws, ears flattening against the racket that the birds were making. *It's too early for that,* she thought grouchily. She climbed off of the nest-pile that she'd created a few days before and followed her mentor's pretty tortoiseshell pelt out of the den.

Her paw had been improving quickly, and it hardly hurt when she walked. It had been a week since it had been injured, and just the day before she'd been told that she was okay to hunt again. She couldn't wait to get out.

Sorrelspots went straight to business. "We're going hunting along the WindClan border, with Owlpounce and Wolfwhisker." At the mention of the grey tom's name, she seemed to bristle for a

moment. *I swear she hates him or something,* Palepaw thought in her drowsy state as she stumbled along, cursing the fact that she wasn't the ThunderClan leader and therefore couldn't tell her entire Clan to shut up.

"Hurry up, slowshrew! By the time you reach us, we'll have already finished hunting at this rate!" Sorrelspots had reached where the other two cats on their patrol waited and had turned back to her. Her pelt, a mixture of large patches of white, ginger and black, rippled in the sunlight that filtered through the blambles that reinforced the camp. Her white muzzle shone in a large patch of sunlight, making it gleam like fresh snow. As Palepaw not-so-gracefully staggered to her side, the tortoiseshell's eyes seemed to laugh, their dark blue depths reminding Palepaw of the night sky, cool and refreshing and beautiful.

She seems awfully cheerful for someone who recently escaped from the clutches of an evil Clan that she seemed petrified of, she mused to herself. Ignoring the protests of her mentor, she sat down and began grooming her clumped fur, allowing the bitter cold in the air to wake her. Once she could keep her eyes open for longer than a few seconds - and didn't look like she'd slept with hedgehogs - she stood up once more, turning her eyes to the others. "I'm ready," she declared, not an ounce of sheepishness that she'd made them all wait in her body.

Wolfwhisker, who seemed to be leading the patrol, looked ready to scold her, but eventually decided that she wasn't worth it and turned around silently, beckoning for the others to follow. *It's unlike him to be so curt,* she thought, swallowing back the sleepy taste in her jaws, *but I suppose that's what happens when you lose someone dear to you, especially an older brother that you looked up to.*

She found herself feeling a lot more awake as they made their way through the undergrowth, and she could barely resist the temptation to jump in the gathered dead leaves that crinkled in the icy breezes that ruffled the cats' pelts.

The scent of WindClan soon became noticeable, their clean yet bitter tang teasing Palepaw's nose. *I wonder if they're as cruel as the ShadowClan cats,* she wondered, but as she pictured Poppypaw and

Lightpaw, the two shy yet friendly apprentices, she found it difficult to believe.

Suddenly, Wolfwhisker froze, raising his tail. "Rabbit," he hissed, "in that bush."

Sure enough, the tantalising scent of rabbit wafted over to the patrol, fresh and delicious. The grey tom crouched, his tail fatally still and straight as he shuffled forward noiselessly, pale eyes narrowed in concentration. She hardly dared to breathe as he crept forward.

Once he'd reached the bush, he held still for a moment, evidently planning the hunt. He was there for so long, though, that Sorrelspots' tail began to lash quietly. He lifted a forepaw to attack the rabbit, but a slight rustle in the bushes told him that he'd been seen.

A heartbeat later, a dark brown shape shot out of the bush, darting away from the cats. Sorrelspots was the one to give chase, her sleek muscles carrying her along the ground as she slowly gained speed. She reached out her forepaws once she was close enough, but the rabbit slipped through her claws and into a hole.

Panting, the tortoiseshell padded back to the group, her ears flattened against her skull. "Why did you hesitate for so long?" She hissed between deep breaths, glaring at Wolfwhisker. Annoyance and frustration rippled along her pelt so strongly that Palepaw could almost feel it warming the cold air.

The younger tom lowered his head, embarrassment shining in his eyes. "I don't know," he whispered. "I know I shouldn't have. I'm sorry."

"'Sorry' doesn't catch any prey," her mentor quoted bitterly, stalking off. "I'm going to hunt over here," she called back. Palepaw was taken aback by the annoyance in her voice. *I take it back. She's not been like this before. Either she really woke up on the wrong side of her nest or she's still bothered by something.*

"It's okay, Wolfwhisker," Owlpounce spoke up for the first time.

"Everyone makes mistakes. The first time I tried to chase a rabbit, I accidentally got my head stuck in--"

"Forget it," Wolfwhisker interrupted the new warrior smoothly. "I'm alright. I just..." He shook his head. "I was remembering the first time I went out as an apprentice. Sorrelspots was my mentor, too. I caught a rabbit, and Thistleheart was so proud of me."

He turned his head away, standing up. "But he's gone now, and I just need to accept that fact." He scanned the bushes surrounding them, gaze cold. "Let's keep going." He padded away from the two younger cats. Palepaw shared a glance with Owlpounce, whose amber eyes gleamed with confusion. *These two have something going on between them, and I can't figure out what.*

With an inward shrug, she turned to Owlpounce. "Want to put those supposed pouncing skills to the test?" She asked jokingly, trying to change the sombre mood.

Immediately the brown tom perked up. "Okay!" He chirped, tail waving with glee. "I'll have a hoot catching more prey than you!" He laughed at his own play on his name, then trotted off, leaving Palepaw to follow, amusedly shaking her head.

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After a long time spent hunting the little prey that roamed in the forest, Palepaw and Owlpounce returned to where Wolfwhisker and Sorrelspots had left them, to find the two sat beside their separate piles, avoiding one another like the other had greencough. Sorrelspots had caught a blackbird and a mouse, Wolfwhisker a squirrel. Palepaw carried her two mice and Owlpounce, true to his word, had caught two mice and a sparrow. He made no attempt to mask the pride in his catch or the fact that he had indeed caught more that her.

Upon hearing the pawsteps, both warriors jumped up at the same time. "You're back?" Sorrelspots asked, just as Wolfwhisker said, "good catch". The two instantly shot looks at each other, but neither said a word as the group headed back to camp. Palepaw wanted to ask about the tension between the two, but her mouth held the limp

bodies of prey. The questions would have to wait.

Camp was nearing when Palepaw felt something cold land on her nose. *Rain?* She wondered, but as she glanced up, she realised that the small, white flakes that fell were not the droplets of water that she knew. *What is*-- another crystal-like flake landed in front of her, making her jump. *Are these stars?*

Her sudden revelation made her panic. "What? Are the stars falling?" More white specks began to land around her. Nobody said a word as she scrambled under the nearby root of a sycamore tree. *Is StarClan falling from the sky? Oh, please don't let it be my fault! I'm sorry I ever put that beetle in Moonpaw's nest! I'm sorry if I offended you by shouting out loud instead of speaking in my head that one time! I'm sorry I-*

Sorrelspots began to laugh. "Palepaw, it's just snow! Why do you look like StarClan warriors are falling from the sky?"

She's surprisingly on the mark, Palepaw realised, before shuffling out from beneath the root. "I thought the sky could have been falling," she mumbled, head lowered in shame.

Sorrelspots began laughing. "First the screaming "thank you", now the sky is falling? Palepaw, have I ever mentioned what a delight it is to mentor you?" Her gaze was now warm, a relieving contrast to her earlier anger. "Come on," she beckoned the others forward with her tail, before setting off herself. "Camp's just up ahead."

They slid through the hole that led them to the camp. Palepaw found herself uncomfortably wet as more snow that hat settled on her pelt seeped into her fur and clung to her frame.

They emerged into a camp dusted with white. It was as if a hundred flat Moonpaws lay on the ground, fluffy and soft and white. Unsure of how to walk on the cold ground, Palepaw began lifting her paws high, then placing them carefully down.

"You can eat one of those mice yourself, then put the other one on the fresh-kill pile," Sorrelspots said, her voice rippling with humour that told Palepaw that she was doing something silly. "Oh, and you

can stop stepping around like you're in front of a fox den. The snow won't bite."

She shook her pelt out, then headed to the fresh-kill pile, where she placed the plumper of the two mice down on top of the feeble pile. *It had been full yesterday,* she realised with a shiver. *I guess we're already suffering the effects of leaf-bare. Not that it's surprising, since it's a moon late.*

She shrugged the thought away and padded to the apprentices' den. Before she sat down, she dusted the snow away from the ground with her tail, then sat in the bare patch it left. Like the night before, she found the creature too small to fully satisfy her and found herself longing for more. *The elders need it more than me though,* she thought, *unfortunately*.

She was about to turn around and head into her den when a thundering voice jolted her out of thoughts of sleep.

"Spottedrose is kitting!"

Chapter 40

Moonpaw jolted out of a light doze as soon as the cry echoed around the camp, then leapt to her paws upon recognising the voice, heading straight for the medicine den.

She had collected water from the lake in a ball of moss for Gingerheart and Kestreltail for most of the day, but after finishing that, she was once again dismissed. None of the warriors had caught greencough, despite the recent plunge in temperature, though she'd heard coughing from several cats.

For the past few days, the medicine cats had been waiting for Spottedrose to kit; the young she-cat had been having pains for a while. It was almost a relief to hear the call from the she-cat's mother.

As soon as she entered, Silverleaf grabbed a bundle of herbs that had been specially set aside for Spottedrose and trotted out of the den, moving swiftly and deftly around the crowd of cats that had gathered together and were murmuring about the low groaning that had started drifting out of the den like slivers of mist, ominous and unnerving.

Moonpaw followed her, half-bounding and half-slinking around the crowd, not wanting to get lost in the gathering of cats and end up bursting into the wrong den but also not wanting to be too slow and miss the birthing. She could almost feel Whitepool's worried gaze that she knew would be on the nursery. According to Silverleaf, she worried far too much about every birth that the Clan had. *She had said it in such an exasperated way, but I think it's sweet that she cares that much.*

Moonpaw had expected to be the one to stay in the medicine den and help any cat that might need it as the medicine cats delivered the kits, but Silverleaf had decided that Whitepool would do it instead, saying that Moonpaw was old enough to "pick it up on the job" now.

Once she'd entered the den, she almost wished she hadn't. Honeywhisker stood a mouse-length away, murmuring words of encouragement, but the young queen didn't seem to notice any of it. The pain in her eyes, which she could hardly keep open, shocked Moonpaw so much that she almost thought about turning around and returning to Whitepool.

"Moonpaw?" Silverleaf turned to her. "Before you worry, this is completely normal. Whenever a she-cat has kits, she goes through a lot of pain. Of course, the younger the cat is, the worse their birthing is, but we can worry about that later."

She began unraveling her bundle, picking out a single leaf, slightly furry and flat. "This is a raspberry leaf. It will soothe your pain and make the birthing easier, so I need you to eat it." She had turned to Spottedrose, who feebly nodded, before withdrawing in another spasm of pain.

After a few moments, Spottedrose stiffly bent her neck and grasped the leaf, fervently chewing it before swallowing. Moonpaw held her breath. *What if it doesn't soothe her? What if she's in too much pain for it to make a difference?* What *if-*

"*Moonpaw!*" Silverleaf snapped, turning to her. Her eyes weren't angry like her voice was, though. They were filled with concern. "You have to stay with us now. Don't let your mind wander and you'll do fine. I know it."

Was that the first compliment she's ever given? She wondered briefly, but didn't have time to ponder as Spottedrose let out a whimper and drew her tail around her body. "Thistleheart," she breathed, her throat too hoarse to speak any louder. "I need Thistleheart," she whined. Moonpaw's heart felt like it was being wrenched into two as she watched the queen whimper for her lost mate.

"He is with you." Silverleaf spoke calmly, as if she'd witnessed the same thing multiple times. *Perhaps she has.* "I can feel him. Can't you, Moonpaw?"

Jumping at her name once again, she blinked, and turned to her mentor, whose eyes looked almost pleading. *Whether he's here or*

not, she needs Spottedrose to have that comfort. "I can," she replied.

I'm here, Spottedrose, murmured a warm voice. It seemed to echo all around Moonpaw, and she quickly recognised the affectionate voice as Thistleheart. *Relax and bring our kits into this world. You'll do wonderfully.*

Awe overrode her mind as the faint, glowing outline of the grey StarClan tom became visible, curled around his mate. He had his head rested on top of hers and was purring softly.

One blink and the image was gone.

"Moonpaw?" Silverleaf seemed to sense that something had shifted, but her confused gaze told Moonpaw that she had been the only one to see Thistleheart.

"He's curled around you, and he's purring," she said to the queen, whose eyes stretched wide as she listened to Moonpaw. "He told you to relax and bring your kits into the world, and that you'll do 'wonderfully'."

Swallowing, Spottedrose nodded, then took a deep breath. "How do I do this?" She asked Silverleaf. Her voice cracked with fear, but the pain seemed to have dulled enough for her thoughts to straighten.

"Just relax," replied the medicine cat. She turned to Moonpaw then, eyes full of meaning.

The day before, Moonpaw had been given the notice that she would be delivering the first kit through Silverleaf's instructions. At the time, she had understood what her mentor was trying to do. It was logical that she experience firsthand what she may have to do on her own now. Now, however, it seemed like her mentor had made a huge mistake. *I could do it all wrong, and kill a kit. This is ridiculous. Why am I even here? I've only been training for... Wait, how long has it been? A moon? I don't remember-- but that's not the point! I shouldn't be delivering a kit already, let alone the first of a cat who is even more scared, inexperienced than me! Maybe I'll just--*

"Moonpaw!"

"Sorry!" She squeaked instantly, knowing that whatever her mentor was shouting at her for, it wasn't for being amazing.

Silverleaf turned to stare right at her, and placed her tail on her shoulder. Her dark blue eyes were calm and trusting. "I know you can do this."

A strange warmth sparked into Moonpaw as her mentor left her, turning once again to the queen. "Your pains will grow sharper as your kits begin to come. It won't be easy, but-"

"Way to reassure a cat," muttered Honeywhisker, interrupting Silverleaf and making Moonpaw jump. She'd forgotten that the pretty she-cat was still there.

Apparently so had her mentor, for when she saw the other staring at her through slitted eyes, she flattened her ears. "In case you've forgotten, this is my job. I'm in this Clan to nourish and sustain life, and believe me when I say that I know what I'm doing. I've helped every queen currently in the Clan with their kits." Her voice changed suddenly, and Moonpaw immediately realised that Honeywhisker had offended her more than she'd meant to, and that Silverleaf was strangely furious. "Would you like to tell me that again, or have you remembered that Clan life isn't just about warriors?"

Honeywhisker seemed to shrink. Shooting a glare at the medicine cat, she turned away. "Sorry. Forgive me for wanting the best for my daughter."

Silverleaf sighed, shaking her head. "It would be easier without you here, so if you really want to help, fetch her a drink from a stream."

Both cats had their eyes narrowed. *As far as I'm aware, nothing has happened between these two... So why do they seem to hate each other?* She stayed still where she was, standing next to Spottedrose, whose moans only grew louder. Moonpaw tuned out the angry she-cats as she watched the queen's body begin to ripple. It reminded her of the lake on a rainy day; the movement was almost unpredictable, but it was still fluid, and moved almost smoothly.

"Um, Silverleaf?" She called, unsure as to whether she should be ready to catch a kit or if something was going wrong.

Her mentor was by her side in an instant. "Place your paw on her belly, nearer her tail," she instructed. Moonpaw followed her instructions wordlessly. "Can you feel anything?"

She gently pressed her paw into the she-cat's belly, who hissed, before withdrawing as she felt the squirming of what she assumed was kits. "Yes," she breathed.

"Then one is on the way." Silverleaf gestured to where the kit would come. "Be ready."

What does "be ready" even mean? How do you prepare for something that-- she didn't have time to finish the thought as a kit slid out, slimy and small. Her first thought, though, was how absolutely beautiful it was.

"Quick!" Silverleaf's voice broke into her thoughts. "Gently move it to her belly, then groom its fur the wrong way. Otherwise, it'll never survive in this cold."

She did so as quickly - and gently - as she could, using her muzzle to guide the silent kit over to its mother, then gently raking her tongue up its pelt, ignoring the weird prickling sensation that the soft fur gave her tongue as she ran it up the opposite way.

"See? You did it." *Silverleaf is just full of praise today, isn't she?* She thought to herself, pausing the grooming for a moment just to feel the tiny kit's racing heartbeat. *But she's right. I did it!* "A little she-cat, as perfect as they come."

She had no time to celebrate as another spasm wracked Spottedrose's body. "I'll take it from here," she told Moonpaw, gently pushing her apprentice away as she crouched by the queen, placing a paw on her lower belly and gently massaging. *Does that reduce the pain, or make it easier for the kit to come?* She wondered, though as a second kit quickly slid out, she assumed that it was the second. It was white, with a ginger tail and ears. Much like the first, it was very quiet. "It's a tom," Silverleaf announced, before moving

it over to where the first one was, then giving it a quick, thorough lick. *I thought kits were supposed to wail as they came out,* she worried. *Is there something wrong with these?*

Spottedrose began whimpering again, almost curling into a ball. Moonpaw could see the ripples on her flank now, and realised how much it must hurt. *I'm glad that I'll never have to go through this,* she thought to herself. Then she signed inwardly. *I won't ever be able to have kits, though,* she realised. *That is probably the only thing I can think that is bad about being a medicine cat.*

She watched Silverleaf massage the queen's flank again, though Honeywhisker's returning pawsteps made her turn around.

The older she-cat had returned with a dripping ball of moss and stood silently in the entryway, trying not to drip it everywhere. Once again, Moonpaw found herself being reminded that even the cats who weren't very nice to her family - especially Amberblaze, in this case - still had feelings, and still loved their own kin. *I wonder if it's the same for Willowpetal,* she thought briefly. *She isn't even nice to her own mate. Then again, she seems to care for her kits.*

"Another tom. Congratulations, Spottedrose." Moonpaw jumped out of her thoughts and turned around to find that another kit had been born, a little grey tabby. She assumed that it was the last one, since Spottedrose had stopped trying to not die and now lay on her side, panting in her exhaustion. Honeywhisker had set the moss down beside her daughter, who feebly stretched her neck to drink, though a lot of the water had been lost.

After drinking, Spottedrose relaxed her head once more, closing her eyes. Her breathing hadn't slowed, and she shook - whether from the fear from the situation that she felt only now or from the physical strain on her body that giving birth had, she didn't know.

"You can't sleep yet," Silverleaf told the queen. "You need to name your kits." Moonpaw was confused at the weariness in her mentor's voice - since when did Silverleaf show that she was tired?

Reluctantly - and with great, evident effort - the queen raised her head gently pressed her muzzle against her first kit. However, upon

touching the ginger and white tom's body, she froze.

"What is wrong with them?" She rasped, her voice hoarse from the yowling. Her eyes told Moonpaw that she already knew - the saddest desolation filled them, one that upset Moonpaw just from seeing it. However, she herself felt a great confusion, too. *The first kit had seemed fine. She'd been breathing, warm and--*

"They're dead." Silverleaf's hollow reply rung throughout the den, and was immediately followed by a sharp intake of breath.

Honeywhisker rushed forward. "No! They can't be! How dare you--" upon touching the kits' still bodies, however, she too froze.

Then, she rounded on the medicine cat. "Couldn't you have done something? Your job is to nurture life, not destroy it!" If it weren't for the agony in her voice, Moonpaw would have defended her mentor immediately, but it was clear that the she-cat's words only meant to cut because of the grief blinding her.

However, cut deep they did. "I'm sorry," Silverleaf replied, lowering her head. "I couldn't have done anything if I'd tried, though. They were stillborn."

But the she-kit wasn't! "Um, Silverleaf, I--"

"Not now, Moonpaw." Her mentor, sounding so distraught, flicked her tail dismissively. "You should get some rest."

"But the she-kit--"

"Please, leave me alone."

The coldness in Silverleaf's voice almost made her recoil. She seemed so young, then, but in a different way. *Perhaps she's never lost a full litter before.* Then she corrected herself. *No! She still hasn't!*

"No." Her mentor turned to say something else - probably to shout - but she continued before she could get a word in. "That she-kit was definitely alive when I groomed her."

Once again, the atmosphere froze. *This seems to happen a lot,*

Moonpaw thought dryly. Her mentor's expression changed from one of hurt to one of surprise. Then, she darted forward. She nudged aside the toms, then placed a paw on the she-kit's belly. Hardly lingering more than a heartbeat, she sat down and began gently massaging the kit's chest.

After a long moment where time itself seemed to hesitate, a sharp, tiny cough split through the desperate silence, followed by the most high-pitched wheezing Moonpaw had heard. The tiny she-kit was turned back over, and Moonpaw could only stare as the kit began to breathe normally, her tiny flanks rising and falling in quick motions.

"Quick," Silverleaf instructed. "Move her closer so she can feed - and eat this." She pushed a pile of green leaves over. "Borage will help your milk to come."

Spottedrose leaned over and lapped up the leaves, then returned to her original position. Her gaze never once left the pelt of her daughter, though.

"You need to name them," Silverleaf added quietly, gesturing to the two toms, who lay stiller than stones, "before we take them away."

"What's the point if they're *dead*?" The new mother muttered bitterly, her ears flattening. She hardly even looked at them.

Shaking her head, Silverleaf placed a paw on the grey tabby's flank. "They'll want a name in StarClan. Do you really want them to remain without a name for many seasons?"

For a moment, Spottedrose hesitated. Then, she turned to the two toms. "The grey tabby will be Thistlekit, then, and the other Leafkit."

"And your daughter?" Silverleaf prompted. Moonpaw was hardly surprised to see the queen's gaze snap back to the tiny she-kit that suckled noiselessly, unknowingly being the most incredible thing she had ever seen.

Suddenly, the queen choked up. Her gaze brimmed with emotion

that threatened to overflow. "Thistleheart always used to say that on a foggy day, the mist over the lake was breathtaking. He wanted to call one of the kits Mistykit."

Little Mistykit squirmed. Finished suckling, she let out the first noise she'd made - a sharp wail, shockingly loud. "I think she likes it," Moonpaw murmured with a laugh.

Silverleaf beckoned for Moonpaw to come, standing up. "If there are any problems, come and get us," she told Spottedrose, who gave a slight nod, still transfixed by the tiny body before her.

Silverleaf's muzzle shook slightly as she picked up the two kits, her tail hanging low as she exited the den. Moonpaw held back for a moment, not wanting to be caught up in the Clan - or see their reactions.

She stayed silent as Honeywhisker lay beside her daughter, wrapping her tail around her. A low purr rumbled from her throat, though it was clear that it wasn't out of pride or happiness.

After a few moments, she emerged from the den too. She was surprised to find it quite dark; it had been relatively light when they'd entered the den. No cats gathered around still, thankfully; they had all headed into their dens. As she left the den, Pebblesplash entered, her two kits - Thornkit large and kind of scary with his startling grey eyes, Rosekit dainty in every way with her beautiful mottled pelt - padding behind her.

As soon as she was out of the heavy atmosphere of the situation, she felt... Strangely normal. *I guess the impact of what's just happened hasn't reached me yet,* she realised, shrugging to herself. *Is that a good thing? I mean, it means I'm not freaking out completely, so surely it is.*

"Moonpaw."

How many times am I going to hear Silverleaf say my name like I'm doing - or have done - something wrong? "Yes?"

"The kits were an omen."

"Oh. Okay."

Silence.

"Wait. What?" She realised what her mentor had said and the impact of what she was implying hit her harder than Palepaw kicked in her sleep - which was certainly saying something. She had just helped a queen give birth. Witnessed the death of two kits and the new life of another. Had to live with the knowledge that perhaps, just perhaps, she could have done something to save them.

"The only kit to survive is the kit that you - the cat who has never delivered a kit before - delivered. Does that not bother you?"

Honestly, Moonpaw had never really thought that deeply about it. *Then again, Silverleaf is a fully trained medicine cat. She's been one for a while now. If any cat is going to notice an omen, it's her.* "Um... Yes?" She guessed.

Luckily for her, Silverleaf didn't actually seem to want an answer. Either that or she just hadn't heard. "Change is coming, Moonpaw, but if you aren't the one to deliver that change, it will be a change for the worse."

Without another word, the pretty she-cat turned around and padded over to her den. Her tail, the two silver patches rippling in the faint glow of the early evening, hung limp, defeated and tired.

For a moment, Moonpaw didn't know what to do. A long moment, for that matter. She felt weary but not tired, and highly doubted that she'd be able to sleep for a while - as was often the case with her.

She checked quickly whether the coast was clear - and luckily for her it was - before sitting down, but not before brushing the soft snow away with her tail. She was a few fox-lengths away from the nursery, nearer the warriors' den to anything else.

She drew her tail around her paws, before realising that said paws were sticky from delivering. She raised one and began to groom it thoroughly, allowing herself to slip into her thoughts. *Change is*

coming, and I have to deliver it... More kits? She tilted her head as she wondered what her mentor could have meant. *Maybe it's something about ShadowClan. With the way our Clans are, I wouldn't be surprised. Or maybe it's the Dark Forest. She may not get mentioned much, but I'm willing to bet that Nightshade has done her fair share of damage here.*

Switching to the other paw, she raised her head to the sky, now thinking about something completely different. *I wonder if the kits have made their way to StarClan. Would they just appear there? Do they have to wait for someone to take them? Maybe they went with Thistleheart.*

The tom's name reminded her of what had happened in the den. *Are you still here?* She asked in her head nervously, anxious partially because the thought could result in a StarClan cat talking to her again, and partially because if Thistleheart didn't reply to her, she'd just spoken to herself. Again.

After a long silence, she assumed that she was alone. Feeling a bit embarrassed, she turned around. *I suppose trying to sleep won't harm me, and at least I'll be warm in the den.*

They're safe with me, came a voice that made her fall over.

Thistleheart? She asked in her mind, too overcome by shock to say anything else. She quickly sat up, praying to StarClan that nobody had seen.

A soft chuckle that seemed to have drifted along the icy wind like the snowflakes that fell sweetened her senses. *Leafkit and Thistlekit, my two beautiful sons. Follow me.*

Once again she found herself watching incredulously as the faint silvery outlines of a thick-furred tom and two tumbling, tussling kits got off the ground and made their way into the sky, walking across the air as if it were solid ground. *Until we meet again, ThunderClan,* came one last murmur, before Thistleheart disappeared, his kits with him, leaving only a trail of glimmering pawprints that too winked away eventually.

With a yawn, fresh exhaustion washed over Moonpaw. *I suppose*

with a day as eventful as this, anyone would feel tired. She lifted herself to her paws, shook off the dust that had accumulated on her thick, long fur and turned to the apprentices' den, where she could already see the sleeping form of her sister, curled up tight on her large pile of moss, as snug as a rabbit in a burrow.

With a sigh that summoned a cloud of hot breath, she padded over, making sure she didn't step on anything that could wake the Clan up.

Once inside the den she immediately felt a wave of warmth surge over her, one that seemed to clutch her eyelids and tug them down. Unable to keep herself awake a moment longer, she sunk into the moss beside Palepaw and very quickly found herself falling fast asleep.

Chapter 41

"Shrewfoot, Silverleaf, Moonpaw, Rowanfur, Hazelshade, Goldenlight, Swanfeather, Sorrelspots, Thistlefrost, Ivymist, Owlpounce, Lilypatch and Palepaw."

A rush of thrilled surprise swept Moonpaw off her feet. Metaphorically, of course; if she had been literally swept off of her feet, she might have died of embarrassment right there.

The previous day, she'd delivered her first kit, witnessed her first death and seen her first StarClan cat while awake. As eventful as it had been, she could hardly remember her nervousness as she fought to keep calm over the thought that she was going to the gathering. Her first gathering.

Almost unaware of the fact that Palepaw was bouncing around her like some oversized rabbit, she imagined the gathering. Amberblaze had always told her kits dramatic stories of the other Clans, though from what she'd seen of the other medicine cats, they'd seemed completely normal. Even Tansyfrost, the ShadowClan medicine cat, had been nice, nothing like her mother's descriptions of rancid, snarling foxes.

And, of course, there was that tom from ShadowClan. Suddenly, Moonpaw felt a lot less excited to go. *What if he's there? He won't recognise me, will he?* She then scoffed at herself. *You have a thick, white pelt, bright yellow eyes and always trip over yourself, both in speech and in physical. You ran into a tree in front of him. I think he'll be able to tell.*

"-And then there's Rippleclaw! Echopaw was nice, and she's his sister, but Rippleclaw is a monster! Don't let his good looks fool you. He's the one who attacked me!" Upon noticing that her sister was actually talking to her, she nodded, not having heard a word of what she'd been saying before, and guiltily pretended to agree.

"Anyway," her sister continued, and Moonpaw found herself grateful

that she hadn't noticed her absent-mindedness, "as long as you stay away from most of them, you'll be fine. Echopaw's nice, though. I'm going to find her when we--"

"Moonpaw! Palepaw!" It was Sunflame, scolding yet amused. "The patrol are waiting for you."

With a jump, Moonpaw spun around to find Bumblestar standing at the head of an assembled patrol, watching them silently. "If you're quite finished," he muttered, though like Sunflame his voice held only affection. *Bumblestar should be Sunflame's father,* she thought, *not Goldensun and his supposed murderous ways.*

Remembering that the patrol was still waiting, she hurried forward, though hesitated when it came to actually standing somewhere. The four new warriors were all engaged in eager conversation. *And by that, I mean that three of them are, and Thistlefrost is standing there looking annoying.*

Palepaw instantly went to her mentor's side and asked her a question, to which her mentor's voice slipped into a whisper. She didn't want to speak to Goldenlight - the golden she-cat seemed to hate Moonpaw and all of her family except for Sunflame - and Swanfeather and Rowanfur were engaged in a light conversation, though neither seemed to actually be saying much. Moonpaw assumed it was due to Swanfeather's recent loss, as the white tom had essentially shut himself in to all except Wolfwhisker.

That left the leader and his mate, and Moonpaw's mentor. Of course, Hazelshade and Silverleaf were speaking to one another, leaving Bumblestar, but he was the leader. Standing beside him would be a complete violation of authority of anyone else. Besides, Shrewfoot had just slid into place beside him. *I feel so out of place,* she realised, feeling a faint embarrassment flush over her.

In the end, she chose to slide into place beside Palepaw; she and her mentor, while still standing close, weren't talking. Her sister greeted her with a purr.

"Are we all ready?" Bumblestar's call broke through the chatter, to which the patrol began nodding. Without another word, the leader

beckoned for them to follow him, then led the way out of camp.

Though Moonpaw had seen the territory multiple times before, there was something thrilling about being led across it in the dark, not knowing exactly where you were going. Perhaps it was just Palepaw as she chattered excitedly like a chaffinch beside her making her feeling like that, though.

At some point, her sister asked Sorrelspots another question, one so sudden and quick that Moonpaw didn't catch it. The two began another quiet conversation, falling back to bring up the rear, and once again Moonpaw found herself alone.

Is there some kind of unspoken rule that you don't walk alone to a gathering? Moonpaw couldn't help but wonder, watching as Bumblestar and Shrewfoot's boring conversation about the border patrols came to a close. Hazelshade quickly filled the space that the deputy left as he fell back to walk beside Silverleaf. While the leader and his new mate murmured lovingly, pelts brushing, Shrewfoot and Silverleaf had less interaction than a pair of pebbles; both tried to avoid meeting each others' gazes, keeping as far apart in the tight group as they could without hitting a tree. *Still, everyone at least seems to have a partner to walk with*.

"Moonpaw?" Unsurprisingly, Moonpaw was once again jolted abruptly out of her thoughts. It was Hazelshade, beckoning to her with her sleek tail. "Come here. You look lonely."

She soon found herself padding alongside Hazelshade, who made no secret of whatever happiness she had found. There was an unusual spring in her step, and her brown eyes shone with a joy that Moonpaw didn't think she'd seen before.

"This is your first gathering, isn't it?" Bumblestar murmured to her. Peering up at the large tom, she nodded silently. *Does Bumblestar expect me to have a normal conversation with him?* She wondered. *He's a leader, and I'm literally the most socially useless lump of white that this Clan has ever had to call an apprentice. Unless a mound of snow somehow passed for a kit.* She scoffed to herself at the thought.

While Moonpaw certainly wasn't hated by a number of cats, she

couldn't help but worry that she would be sat alone. *Palepaw wouldn't stop talking about Echopaw, and she mentioned a Poppypaw and a Lightpaw. I'd probably just make it awkward for them. Hazelshade won't want to sit with an apprentice, I don't really want to sit with the other medicine cats... Do I have to sit with the medicine cats?*

She shuddered at the thought of all of those cats staring at her, a new medicine cat apprentice amongst well-known cats, and found herself hoping that she could find somewhere to hide.

However, she didn't have time to plan further because the group had come to a halt in front of the lake shore. Moonpaw was right at the front of the group, meaning she got a clear view of the sight ahead of her.

And what a view it was.

The full moon, shining brighter in the sky than any star, illuminated the serene darkness that enshrouded them, creating beautiful rippling light as the icy breeze caressed the lake surface. Though it was very cold, ice had only just began to form around the shore, creating a thin ring of glistening shards of ice. Every time a strong wave nudged it, a piece would fracture and drift away.

She averted her gaze to the fallen tree. It had a long, thick trunk, and while it held firm, she could see that most of the bark had fallen away, and what was left had been claimed by ice. A shudder rippled through her at the thought of accidentally stepping on a patch of thin ice, and she vowed to herself to be careful of where she put her paws.

Unsurprisingly, Bumblestar was the first to cross, leaping up with a large bound, his hind legs kicking up a small amount of dirt as he made the jump. His claws instantly found their way into the trunk, and he turned back to his Clan. "It's slippery," he warned, "so make sure you've got a tight grip."

Hazelshade was next, a graceful leap sending her just mouse-lengths behind Bumblestar. She too dug her claws in immediately.

She quickly found it to be her turn next. Hardly daring to think -

and risk losing her sanity over worrying about what would happen if she fell off - she crouched, then kicked off of the ground with as much force as she could muster. She let out all her breath in one go as she landed squarely on the wood, and found her claws unsheathing and hooking into it instinctively.

Like Bumblestar had said, it was slippery, but she held tight, staring straight ahead at Hazelshade's pretty coat. Above her, she could see Bumblestar's thick fur fluttering about in the wind that seemed to grow stronger with every pawstep.

It seemed like an eternity had passed before she finally reached the end of the log. She quickly leapt off, landing on the shore of the island, amongst a scattering of round pebbles. She dabbed one gingerly with a paw, but withdrew it instantly as an icy shiver shot up her pad. *Cold!*

Shivering to herself, Moonpaw turned to see whether her sister was coming. Her eyes met instantly with Sorrelspots', who gave her a polite nod before leaping off and trotting swiftly into the trees. Palepaw was behind her. She could see a pale golden blur swishing frantically behind her. As her sister grew closer, she saw it was her tail. *She must really not like it up there,* she realised. *Then again, who would?*

With a flick of her ear as a greeting when Palepaw landed ungracefully beside her, she turned to where the trees loomed menacingly in front of her. The closest was a thin birch, the bark of which had claw marks scored down them. *The work of ancestors marking this place as their own?* She wondered, but didn't ask.

"Isn't it cool?" Palepaw instantly said as soon as she'd gained her breath. "And it's even cooler if you go through the trees!"

With a silent nod, she followed her sister's words and padded up the bank and into the trees, making sure that she didn't step on any of the icy stones. It had snowed and settled earlier, though here on the island, the snow didn't seem to reach the trees. In fact, it also seemed a lot warmer than ThunderClan's territory. *Are StarClan cats protecting this place?* She wondered as she peered around the beautiful island.

The scent of another Clan reached her quickly. A fresh scent, one that, while not smelling of much more than grass and fresh air, was strong. *Judging by the fact that every cat I've ever met has said that RiverClan stink of fish, and that I've been to the ShadowClan border, I'm going with WindClan,* she guessed.

Ducking under a bramble tendril that hung off of a tree's low branch, she soon found herself in a hollow. She was once again reminded how beautiful it was there, especially the middle tree, which had low-hanging branches - presumably where the leaders sat, due to how Bumblestar leapt up and greeted a tom already sat there, before settling into his own branch - and ivy that crawled up the trunk, creating a pretty pattern of leaves. The moonlight that filtered through the branches lacing over her head was bright, though she could've sworn that clouds had roamed the skies just minutes ago.

Her eyes fell on the gathering of cats below, all skinny and small. *Are WindClan cats supposed to be this small?* She went to ask Palepaw but found that she'd already bounded over to a white apprentice, whose green eyes sparkled in amusement as Palepaw enthusiastically greeted her.

Not really knowing what to do with herself, she sidled over to the low-hanging branch of a young oak, out of the way and in the shade. *If this is only one Clan, I won't want to be squashed by the rest.*

Glancing around at the cats from both Clans, it dawned on her just how lucky ThunderClan had been so far that leaf-bare; though she knew WindClan cats were skinny - Beechbark, the WindClan medicine cat, had been lithe and slim - these cats were evidently starved, with their dull coats and jutting ribs. Compared to the shining, thick pelts of her own Clanmates, WindClan looked like fur and sticks, though it was embarrassing even for her to admit it to herself. She couldn't imagine how the WindClan cats felt.

A sudden change in the winds brought along a much more repuslive stench. It was nothing like ShadowClan's rotting leaves and earthy scent, more of a sharp tang that made her want to wrinkle her nose. *That's got to be RiverClan,* she thought firmly, *and this must be what fish smell like.*

A muscular, dark brown tom padded out from a low-hanging oak branch. Though he was mostly solid brown, patches of paler brown, almost fawn, hardly more than flecks, dotted his body, reminding her of a blackbird. Dark amber eyes shone from the darkness.

He was followed by a numerous sleek-pelted cats. All seemed possibly even more well-fed than ThunderClan. *It must be because they have the river,* she realised. *Our prey burrows, but theirs has to stay in one place. And if they run out, they still have land prey.*

However, a sudden silence rippled through the clearing as the tom leading them made his way to the leaders' branches and leapt up to one of the unoccupied ones, sitting down. He dipped his head to Bumblestar, who had a concerned frown, then to the grey and white WindClan leader, whose eyes darted quickly from the brown tom to the Clan he'd brought with him. The three quickly slipped into a discussion.

Moonpaw wanted to ask a nearby warrior what was going on but the only cats near her were a group of young RiverClan warriors, a dark grey she-cat and a dark grey tabby tom.

She decided to stay silent, settling back into her spot.

A brief moment passed in silence, before an uneasy murmur spread about.

"They're talking about her, aren't they?" It was the RiverClan she-cat. Her ears were flattened, her eyes focused on the earth beneath her paws.

The tabby merely nodded. His tail tip flicked agitatedly.

Who is "her"? She tried to recall Palepaw's excited summary of her first gathering but remembered nothing. *Is somebody missing? Or is everyone talking about some cat here?* She found herself wishing she'd paid more attention to modern leaders rather than past ones; she was confused, and there was nobody nearby that she could ask.

It wasn't long before the last Clan arrived. ShadowClan was led by a white tom with a sleek pelt, though like WindClan's leader, he had a

scrawny belly and protruding ribs.

By his side was a much larger tom, with short black fur and unnerving amber eyes. He didn't meet any cat's eyes, but the cold depths of his seemed to silence any cat who looked their way. Ugly scars parted the fur on his shoulders and muzzle.

With a shudder, Moonpaw fought the urge to look away as the skinny cats filed in. *I have to see if he's here,* she reminded herself, forcing focus into her thoughts. *And I really hope he isn't. He seemed to have something to say.*

She only allowed her breath to billow out in a cloud of icy breath after the last cat had entered, a pretty white she-cat with leaf-green eyes. The cat she'd met the other day hadn't entered. *At least that's one problem I don't have to worry about,* she thought, a sigh of relief escaping her mouth.

At last, four cats sat in the tree's low branches. Moonpaw couldn't help but notice the difference between all four: the WindClan leader was so skinny and small that he could've been mistaken for a bony rabbit; the ShadowClan leader was proud, muscular but still skinny, like a starved owl; Bumblestar looked like a fluffy, giant ball of sunset; and the RiverClan leader looked like a shiny tree missing flecks of its bark.

She held her breath, eager for the gathering to begin, suddenly feeling the excitement that had conquered the air as cats in front of her grew to a hushed silence, leaning forward to hear what the leaders had to say.

There was a brief exchange of glances before Driftstar stood.

"Normally we'd start with a yowl, but it looks like everybody came straight here." He paused, gaze scanning the pelts of his Clanmates, before speaking again. "WindClan is doing well."

"He has more pride than a half-starved badger."

A voice beside Moonpaw made her jump. She didn't take her eyes off of the WindClan leader, merely shuffled away; she didn't want to

sit with anyone. Besides, they likely hadn't been talking to her, anyway.

"We have enough prey to see us through this harsh leaf-bare. Two cats joined the elders' den two sunrises ago - Thicketfur and Oatwhisker." *Oh, wasn't that the WindClan medicine cat who didn't come to the Moonpool*? Moonpaw hadn't known that he was that old.

"We also welcome kits into our ranks; Pouncekit and Sparkkit were born soon after the last gathering to Duskfoot and Lioncloud."

Instead of the cheer that Moonpaw had heard would usually happen when a new birth or title was announced, the only sound echoing around was a low murmur of worry.

"Kits aren't good for leaf-bare," the cat near her muttered again.

"Quiet," she muttered back subconsciously. Whoever this cat was, they were interrupting her concentration.

"You're being a lot bolder than you were the other day," the cat chuckled back.

Moonpaw froze.

She turned her head slowly, not daring to breathe as a familiar face stared down at her, clear blue eyes dancing with amusement.

"Hello, ThunderClan apprentice."

~

What do you think our two protagonists' full names will be?

Chapter 42

"You," was all Moonpaw could think to say as she stared at the ShadowClan tom she'd met at the border.

"Me," he replied, the makings of a smirk perching on his muzzle. The amused arrogance that he exerted made her want to hit him. Gently, of course, and with a very sheathed paw.

With a flick of her ear to acknowledge that she'd heard him, she began to turn her head slowly away from him. *Maybe if I ignore him, he'll go away?*

"You look like the moon."

Just my luck. "Well, that is my name," she mumbled in return, trying her best to listen to Bumblestar as he spoke of the new warriors.

He went silent for a while, before scoffing. "Of course it is." *Is he being sarcastic?* Moonpaw couldn't tell.

"What's that supposed to mean?" She turned to eye him, feeling her fur rise. "Look, if there's something you have to say, please just say it. Otherwise, save the teasing for your friends." She couldn't help but feel slightly proud of the confidence in her voice. *I wish I felt that way inside,* she thought, half-wistful and half-joking.

A swift glance to his paws told Moonpaw that the presence of this tom meant more than just teasing. "No, I'm sorry. I know more than anyone what it feels like to be teased."

Now, Moonpaw was intrigued. The tom beside her seemed like he had a lot of friends; he spoke with a level of charisma that could only come from a cat certain of his place amongst the other warriors in his Clan. *And it's not like he isn't bad looking, either,* a sly voice scoffed inside her head. She hushed it quickly by abruptly shaking her head slightly.

Apology shone in the tom's light eyes as he dipped his head. "I am Rippleclaw," he murmured, "and I was told to follow the moon."

For a moment, she wasn't sure how to respond. *The moon? That sounds cryptic enough to be from StarClan! But perhaps he's lying... Oh, but what if he isn't? Does he think that the "moon" is me? I thought he didn't believe me when I told him my name... Wasn't it announced at a previous gathering? Maybe Bumblestar forgot? No, of course he didn't. But--*

"--So I didn't really know what to do, but..." Rippleclaw suddenly trailed off, and Moonpaw realised that she hadn't been looking or listening, and that the tom had probably been explaining what he'd just said.

"Sorry," she mumbled, pawing at a flat stone with her pad, ignoring the shivering cold it welcomed her with. "Can you start again?"

This time, she made sure to listen. "I don't know why, but Goosewhisker told me over and over again that I had to follow the moon. As a kit, I never thought much of it, but now, I can see the darkness that festers on the hatred that ShadowClan seems to have for ThunderClan. Whatever Goosewhisker wanted me to do has something to do with that darkness, and dispelling it. And apparently, *you* are the key to saving my Clan."

Moonpaw just sat there for a while, gazing up into his serious blue eyes. The arrogance had been replaced with a sense of responsibility so great that for a moment, Moonpaw could visualise the desperation that the tom must be feeling. *Whatever is wrong with ShadowClan must be terrible,* she realised with a wince.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, she turned her head away from him. "You probably have the wrong cat," she informed him carefully. "There isn't much special about me. I'm a medicine cat apprentice from ThunderClan. Why would I be able to help you?" *Not to mention, I'm clumsy, shy, quiet, embarrassing, strange...*

Moonpaw could almost feel the disappointment radiating off of him. "I don't know," he replied, his voice low, almost sad, "but I know that the moon that I've been searching for is definitely you. I

knew from the moment I first saw you."

Shoving down the embarrassment that the tom had just made her feel, she cleared her throat. "And how do you think I can help?" She asked.

Once again, Rippleclaw's reply was forlorn. "I don't know how, but I know that you definitely *can*." He drew his tail around his paws, clear eyes gazing up to where the leaders stood. She was briefly aware of Bumblestar speaking of Thistleheart, though hardly paid it any thought.

The tom stayed silent for a while longer, and Moonpaw found herself focusing on the leaders once more.

Bumblestar had spoken after Driftstar, so it was the RiverClan tom's turn.

"Greetings, cats of all Clans," he began. His eyes scanned the crowd carefully, gaze thoughtful. "As you may be able to tell, Eveningstar is not here. She lost her last life to an incurable sickness in her stomach after the last gathering. We don't know what caused it, but we couldn't save her. I, Quailstar, have taken over her position, with Ashwing as my deputy."

A cheer spread throughout the gathering, the majority of which coming from the tom's own Clan. Moonpaw could only assume that he was a popular warrior, however, as many cats from the other Clans looked pleased at his new position.

"He has done a lot for the Clans," murmured Rippleclaw, once again reminding her of his unnerving presence. "A few leaf-bares ago, or so Goosewhisker used to say, he led a patrol of warriors from all Clans to track down a large family of foxes that had been terrorising all the Clans, and quickly got rid of them. He saved stray ShadowClan kits from drowning, he fought off a dangerous rogue... The stories are endless, and those are only the believable ones."

With a polite nod - what else was she supposed to do? - Moonpaw kindly ignored the tom.

"RiverClan is well-fed this leaf-bare. Even now, as we near the harshest days of the season, the rivers are plentiful. We welcome Tigerpaw and Sweetpaw as our newest apprentices."

The names of the apprentices were called out enthusiastically as two small she-cats - who Moonpaw assumed were Tigerpaw and Sweetpaw - raised their heads proudly. A white she-cat sat a mouse-length behind them, gazing affectionately down at them. *Their mother?*

"ShadowClan, too, is thriving." Flashstar's voice sliced through the cheers, silencing every cat. Moonpaw felt a chill creep up her spine, and not just because the atmosphere seemed ten times colder.

"Splashnose's kits are strong, and Amberfoot has had Flurrykit."

"Splashnose's kits are Birdkit, Nutkit and Pinekit," Rippleclaw recalled quietly. "Flashstar is their father. He mentions them every gathering."

ShadowClan cheered heartily for their queens, and RiverClan and WindClan eventually joined in, but ThunderClan, Moonpaw realised with an unnerving edge to her thoughts, were deadly silent. The only cat she could see cheering was Palepaw, jumping up and down alongside one of her friends, a pretty grey and white apprentice.

Rippleclaw joined in beside her, but it was evident that he wasn't nearly as enthusiastic as some of his Clanmates.

"We would kindly advise that Clans keep to their side of the border, or there will be unavoidable consequences." Another chilled silence swept over the Clans as the white tom said this.

"Are you suggesting that murdering my son was an 'unavoidable consequence'?"

Swanfeather had stood up and was making his way from his place next to Rowanfur and a few other warriors to the front of the gathering, stopping at the base of the rock to glare up at Flashstar.

As if the tom's anger couldn't be heard or seen, Flashstar dipped his head, closing his eyes momentarily. When he opened them again,

they glinted. Moonpaw felt a chill run down her spine as he replied, "Yes, it was. What is my Clan supposed to do if we are attacked?"

"You could maybe not kidnap an apprentice and two warriors?" Moonpaw wouldn't have recognised it if she hadn't been staring in her direction, but over the cold quiet of the gathering and the silent fury of Swanfeather, Silverleaf's voice carried far, even though she'd only muttered it.

Moonpaw held her breath as Flashstar paused, turning his head slowly to where the voice had come from. As soon as he caught sight of Moonpaw's mentor, glaring defiantly up at him, he leapt down, then stalked over to her. Even from her great distance Moonpaw could see that his fur was bristling.

"Know your place, *medicine cat*," he spat. Moonpaw couldn't make out his facial expression, but the lashing in his tail was enough to warn Moonpaw that he was angry. Very angry. She hardly dared to watch her mentor's reaction, knowing fully well what she'd do.

"Know *your* place, young leader," her mentor snapped. *Of course,* she thought with a wince. *Of course you would stir up trouble.* "I was a medicine cat seasons before you were even born, so perhaps you should remember that you do not own every cat in the forest, or their lives."

"That is quite enough." Bumblestar had also leapt down from his branch and was making his way to where the two cats were growling at each other. He abruptly pushed between them. His fur was also bushed up, though he was clearly not going to fight. He stared down at Flashstar. "This is a gathering, and I will not have it disrupted by two cats who should know best."

For a time, Flashstar just watched him, expression unreadable from Moonpaw's distance, but eventually he nodded sharply, then beckoned with his tail, before padding away. "Come, ShadowClan," he called, his voice frosty. "We are finished here."

As the Clan filtered out of the gathering, Moonpaw found her gaze drifting towards her mentor again, but as soon as she caught sight of her mentor, she almost wished she hadn't. The she-cat looked so

furious that it was hard to believe that she was even a medicine cat. *Only a warrior should hold that kind of fury for an enemy,* she thought with a shudder, *let alone enemies at all.*

As if she knew what was coming, she braced herself for Rippleclaw's final speech.

"Look, will I see you again? I really need your help, even if I'm not sure why." She turned to meet the tom's gaze, and then wished she hadn't, because it was so lost and pleading and genuinely sad that she had no idea how to reply.

She swallowed then turned her head to look at where Silverleaf was-- only to find her storming over. Rippleclaw had seen her angry mentor too, she realised, as he quickly got to his paws, the urgency radiating all the more strongly off of him.

"I don't know," was all she could think to say. *Well, what does he expect, telling you all this nonsense so suddenly?*

"Will you at least think about it?"

She hesitated. Realised that her mentor was a fox-length away. Very quickly stopped hesitating. "Yes, I will."

Upon that, he slipped away into the darkness behind her so silently he could have been the shadows that seemed to creep away from the trees under the moon's glare. *Or Silverleaf's glare,* she thought, suppressing another shudder. She hardly even registered his soft "I've go to got" as he practically drifted past her. Confusion lined her mind as she tried to work out what he'd said that for.

"And what do you think you were doing, talking to one of those traitorous flea-bags? You should know that you can't trust them with anything." Her mentor's tail lashed as she came to a bristling halt in front of her apprentice.

"Did a prophecy tell you that?" She asked before she could stop herself. Of course, she regretted every word as the fury on Silverleaf's face seemed to grow into a blazing fire.

"I don't need a prophecy to tell me that leaves fall in leaf-bare. If its

obvious, then I just know." Moonpaw could only nod silently to avoid her mentor exploding.

For a few moments, Silverleaf just stared at her, likely trying to figure out if she agreed or was just trying to get her to shut up, so she added, "I'm sorry."

Thankfully, her mentor didn't take the matter further, and seemed to accept her apology, for she turned around and began following after the silhouette of a cat that stood, waiting for them.

Before following, Moonpaw reflected upon what the tom had told her. *He hadn't seemed very evil,* she thought to herself, eyes narrowing slightly as she tilted her head to view the stars. They certainly seemed beautiful. *But then again, neither had Nightshade, and look who she turned out to be.*

With a shrug to herself, she began padding after her mentor, whose voice she could already hear complaining to the other cat that ShadowClan were filthy, mangy... No, she didn't want to listen to what she had to say. She blocked her mentor out and became lost to her own thoughts as she began the journey back to her Clan.

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Do you think Palepaw will take a mate? If so, who?

Chapter 43

A singing robin woke Moonpaw from an icy dream, rousing her sharply with its trilling.

Blinking sleepy eyes, she heaved herself to her paws, half-hoping she would collapse back into slumber before she truly woke up.

However, the freezing cold that bit her nose and raked down her throat held her back from even feeling comfortable, so she begrudgingly sat down and began to groom her fur. Every turn of her neck sent a shiver of pain down her spine, her muscles aching. *Oh dear, I'm dying. Can I go back to sleep now?*

But she soon remembered the gathering and a cloud darker than the ones she knew were looming in the sky lingered over her. *Rippleclaw's request,* she recalled, and shuddered. *What do I do about that? Should I tell someone? Not Silverleaf; she wouldn't be rational, seeing as it concerns ShadowClan. Whitepool? She'd probably tell Silverleaf. Palepaw? It probably doesn't concern her... But maybe it doesn't have to. Alright, if I get a chance, maybe I'll talk it out with her. But what shall I say?*

However, the brisk winds drifting into the den meant that she couldn't stay still thinking for long without turning into a living icicle. She stretched quickly, and, after a longing glance towards her sister, who hadn't woken up yet and slept more peacefully than she ever could, padded out of the den.

The cold that hit her was painful.

The entire camp had been blanketed in a beautiful sheet of snow that even the warriors trudging through it seemed to despise. Thornkit sat outside the nursery, watching his sister as she tumbled and squealed and play-fought with pretend warriors. *Where is Pebblesplash?* The thought passed through her mind with no small amount of worry. *She should be watching her own kits, not getting one to do it for her.*

But at that moment Owlpounce trotted over, eagerly calling them over and announcing that he could spend the day looking after them. *Strange,* she thought. *Surely ThunderClan would need every warrior they could spare to hunt in this weather.*

She shrugged it off and kept moving towards the medicine den. Snow tickled her belly, dampening her paws and spirits. *Who would have thought that something that had received such a magical description from Amberblaze could actually be such an awful inconvenience?*

She hurried along, eager to push past the weird feeling of snow underpaw, and when she reached the den, she felt extremely relieved. A wall of snow stood in front of the entrance, though there was a gap behind it big enough for a cat, maybe two, to squeeze past, creating a barrier but also clearing a space for Moonpaw to shake off her already sodden pelt.

However, as she did so, she realised that even though she was still outside, she wasn't nearly as cold as she had been when walking through the snow, even though her paws were numb. *Is the barrier holding back the wind?* She realised that it could be the case, then made a mental note to remember that. *Snow can be a bigger help than hindrance if you use it right.*

She vaguely recalled one of Redfeather's stories regarding a ThunderClan leader being healed by snow and immense cold and couldn't prevent the shudder. *I guess I'll leave it to StarClan to decide when, though.*

After finally coming to appreciate the snow - and making sure that her pelt was dry - she entered the den and was pleased to be greeted by the pelts of Bumblestar and Hazelshade.

"What wonderful news!" Rumbled the Clan leader enthusiastically, pressing his head against his mate's, who nodded just as eagerly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Moonpaw murmured, not wanting to interrupt. The two turned to Moonpaw. Hazelshade mouthed, "kits!" as she lay eyes on the apprentice, and Moonpaw immediately realised what was going on. *They're having kits!*

Her lack of energy and sore muscles forgotten, she continued to Whitepool in a new energy, but stopped when she saw the faraway look in the medicine cat's eyes. "Whitepool?" She said with an air of uncertainty.

As if she'd been in a trance, the white and grey she-cat jolted. "Oh, Moonpaw!" She pushed past the leader and his mate and rubbed her muzzle against the apprentice's. "Am I glad to see you!"

Surprised and overwhelmed by the she-cat's sudden show of affection, she nodded awkwardly. "Um, okay," she replied. *Well what else am I supposed to do?*

Whitepool turned to the two purring cats and immediately shooed them out. "Sorry, but we're busy in here." *She's being quite authoritative today,* she noted. *That's Silverleaf's job... But come to think of it, where is she?*

Once they had left, she returned her gaze to the apprentice. "I'm going to need your help a lot today," she began, turning to the spare nests where patients were kept. For the first time she realised that they weren't empty.

Pebblesplash occupied the first nest, sprawled out on her side in a way that made the usually elegant, soft she-cat seem somewhat broken. She slept, though her breathing was shallow and raspy. *That explains why Owlpounce was to look after the kits,* she realised, *though not why their father couldn't. Where is Oakfur?*

Gingerheart still lay in one of the nests, though unlike Pebblesplash, who still appeared well-fed despite her evident sickness, she was scrawny. The way her bones jutted out of her flanks reminded Moonpaw of Driftstar and his Clan of fur and bones, and that worried her. *She was being fed, right? I don't think she's gone hungry, yet she's this skinny...*

However, Whitepool padded straight past the two sleeping she-cats and over to another occupied nest. The contents of this one made her stomach churn, her eyes widening. *Silverleaf.*

"She was fine last night," murmured Whitepool, who suddenly

looked very faraway again. "I don't know how she caught it so quickly, but Silverleaf has whitecough."

The silver and white she-cat's flank barely moved, so at first Moonpaw wasn't even sure if her mentor was alive. Fear gripped her for a short time, until a weak breath, ragged and stuttering, escaped from Silverleaf's jaws.

"She's asleep now," Whitepool explained, "but she woke up earlier with a bad fever. It is only whitecough, but the way that she's progressing, it could very well become greencough." her voice wavered slightly as she spoke the name of the awful illness.

Moonpaw found herself studying the silver and white she-cat with scared eyes. *I thought medicine cats weren't supposed to catch greencough!* She forced her fur to lie flat at the thought of ThunderClan losing a medicine cat, especially during a whitecough outbreak. She hadn't witnessed a patient with greencough or whitecough herself, of course, but the elders told stories of the awful sickness that gripped cats and shook their bodies with its plaguing symptoms until they died.

She took in her mentor after considering this. "She looked fine the day at the gathering," she whispered, an anxious butterfly stuck in her throat. *I don't think I could have spoken louder if I'd tried.*

Whitepool's only response was a nod.

Her gaze lingered on the sleeping medicine cat. Though the weak shuddering breaths scared Moonpaw, the she-cat herself was quite pretty. *I suppose not scowling and snapping at every living thing within a fox-length of you really works wonders for your appearance,* she mused.

Her fur was sleek and shiny, her build an elegant slimness, the silver patches on her back storm clouds in an overcast sky. Of course, her fur wasn't groomed. In fact, it was slightly tousled by what Moonpaw assumed was struggling in her sleep, but with the peaceful expression she wore, it was easy to see past that.

Not wanting to seem weird for staring too long, she turned to

Whitepool, who had begun to organise a few herbs into piles. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Hm?" Whitepool didn't seem to be listening. "Enough catmint... Maybe tansy... Borage and thyme..." A nervous glance was cast towards where Moonpaw waited for Whitepool to notice her, though it was likely aimed towards Silverleaf. "Oh, Moonpaw, could you check on the elders for me? Their lungs are the weakest, so if any cat were to get sick, it would be them."

Well, I suppose that worked out. Moonpaw had perked up at the idea of visiting the elders as soon as Whitepool had mentioned it. "Of course," she replied quickly, almost rocking on her paws in eagerness. *I'd never miss an opportunity to spend time with them.*

The medicine cat turned to look at her, and with a warm blink, flicked her tail in dismissal.

Moonpaw trotted briskly to the elders' den, excitement rippling throughout her pelt. *I wonder what story Redfeather will tell me today? Maybe I'll get to hear about Firestar, or maybe Squirrelflight!* Then she scolded herself. *You're not here to hear stories! You have an important job.*

Once she passed through the entrance of the den, she immediately sensed something was wrong. Whether it was the way that both elders crouched side by side, huddled in one nest, or the stench that seemed to linger in the cold air, she immediately directed all her focus to the elders.

As it turned out, Redfeather was crouching down next to Thrushwhisker, who lay with his head on his paws, gazing into the distance with unfocused eyes. Upon seeing Moonpaw's shadow fall by her paws, the elderly she-cat glanced up, then sighed in relief. "Moonpaw," she croaked, beckoning with her tail.

Moonpaw gingerly made her way to the elders, taking great care to steer clear of Gingerheart's nest. *If she comes back to a messy nest, we're all doomed.* "What can I do?" She asked, trying her best to look at Redfeather and not the weak form of the proud elderly tom she'd grown to care for.

Redfeather had never looked so troubled. "I need your help to move him into the medicine den," she explained quickly. "*Before* he starts complaining about how he doesn't need to."

As if on cue, Thrushwhisker's eyes narrowed, and he turned to the dark ginger she-cat. "That's because I *don't* need to," he snapped with as much energy as he seemed to be able to muster. "Leave the herbs to the younger ones. I've suffered worse."

However, once finishing his sentence, he broke off into a coughing fit that seemed to shake the den. It lasted so long that the short period of silence following was so eerie that even Moonpaw felt like talking.

"You're clearly not fine," retorted Redfeather, "so Moonpaw is here to help me carry you to the medicine den."

Upon hearing her name, the elder once again raised his head. When his eyes met Moonpaw's, he immediately forced a purr that seemed to rattle his bones. "Ah, Moonkit," he murmured in a gravelly voice. "Here for a story?"

Has he forgotten that I'm an apprentice? Moonpaw felt uncomfortable. How was such a proud cat reduced to this overnight? She almost turned tail to retreat and calm down, though quickly shook her head at the thought. *I'm a medicine cat now,* she reminded herself. *This is my job.*

She padded to Thrushwhisker's other side, then pressed tightly against his flank to get the friction needed for lifting. Redfeather did the same, and soon they had a protesting Thrushwhisker wobbling between them.

The snow made it difficult for them to move much, but they pushed through it. Once or twice Moonpaw got her paw stuck in a less compact place and almost slipped, but Redfeather helped her out while managing the full weight of the tom. *She really is something,* she found herself thinking in admiration.

They reached the den quicker than Moonpaw had expected them to, though had some trouble passing through the snow barrier. It was

quickly discovered that the three of them could not fit together. In the end, Moonpaw went on ahead, leading the way.

Once she was past, she instinctively prepared to shake off her pelt, but reluctantly forced herself still as she recalled the sick elder behind her. *Let's not be the cause of his death,* she thought with a shudder, turning to make sure they got through.

Though it was a tight squeeze, as Moonpaw had estimated earlier, the two cats could make it past the strong wall of snow. Redfeather nodded at her to go on, so she padded into the den, wincing at the cold that nipped her belly.

"Whitepool-" she started, but the medicine cat wasn't listening. Her ear was pressed against Gingerheart's chest, her eyes forced shut.

"Not good," she was murmuring. "Not good at all." Her eyes opened suddenly, fixing not on Moonpaw but on the cats that had just emerged beside her. "Oh no!"

She cut her cry short after seeing Redfeather flinch. "I'm sorry, I... bring him here." Whitepool took Moonpaw's place beside Thrushwhisker and led the tom away to a nest next to Pebblesplash. Moonpaw found it hard to miss how her tail was now bushed up, the tip of it flicking from side to side.

Moonpaw stood and watched the medicine cat press her ear to the tom's chest, then sighed with relief. "His heart is strong," she told Redfeather, "so he should be fine this time."

"Hey!" Thrushwhisker protested. "I'm right here! No need to talk about me like I'm gone."

Redfeather, ignoring the tom, echoed Whitepool's sigh with a rough purr of relief. "Thanks, Whitepool," she murmured, gently touching the medicine cat with her tail before padding away, nodding quietly to Moonpaw as she padded past.

After getting Thrushwhisker settled, the medicine cat turned to Moonpaw again. "Could you fetch Bumblestar for me?" She paused, turning to Gingerheart, and added, "she's not going to hang on

much longer, and he'll want to see her before then."

Why would Bumblestar want to see her? I don't think I've ever even seen them speak. Still, she nodded, eager to leave the sickly atmosphere, heading out of the den with a briskness in her step, but she didn't need to go any further than the snow barrier, because the leader was already making his way towards the den.

Here goes. "I've been sent to get you," she called to Bumblestar, whose ears had pricked at the sight of her. "Gingerheart's-"

"I know," the leader replied. It shocked Moonpaw to see his eyes pained. *What does Gingerheart mean to him?* "I was going to see her anyway."

Bumblestar hurried into the den, his pelt brushing hers as he passed by. *He was over a mouse-length away from me*, she realised, confusion lighting her thoughts as she noticed how much the leader was bristling. *What could have possibly gotten him to be so unnerved?*

She followed him in, watching silently from the entrance as he took in the form of the skinny ginger elder, then settled himself gently in front of her.

"Mother?" He breathed, barely audible to Moonpaw. He gently nosed the motionless she-cat's face, then stared intently at her. Moonpaw blinked in surprise. She hadn't known that Gingerheart was his mother - and her kin.

She hadn't expected Gingerheart to stir, but after a tense moment where nothing could be heard but Thrushwhisker's faint wheezing and Whitepool's low mumbles as she organised her herbs again, two amber eyes cracked open. Bright amber eyes, like two suns. *I suppose that's where Sunflame gets his eyes from,* she realised.

"Bumblestar," she rasped. "You came." Though her gaze was clouded, her head shaking as she raised it to greet him, determination shone from her, and she managed to hold herself up.

The leader quickly stopped her struggles by placing a gentle paw on her shoulders. "Don't push yourself," he pleaded. "I don't know what

I'll do without you."

This seemed to surprise his mother. "After all the hostility and ignorance I've given you, you still love me," she breathed, seeming to marvel at the tom in front of her. Then her expression softened. "Did you ever stop being my needy little kit?" She croaked. Her eyes were unfocused yet a deep admiration glistened in them.

For a moment, Bumblestar seemed taken aback, though his expression melted as his mother pressed her nose into his thick fur. He lowered his head so it rested gently above hers, and murmured, "If you stay with me, I'll be anything for you."

Moonpaw had to remind herself that sighing aloud would have disturbed the two, and instead began to sigh inwardly. *He's so sweet.*

Bumblestar's low murmur shattered her thoughts. "Is there anything I can do for you, before you..." He trailed off helplessly, eyes darting to the side, as if he expected the answer to be there.

But Gingerheart shook her head - or, tried to. All she could manage was a slight inclination. "All I want to do is tell you how proud I am of you, and always have been. I'm only sorry I never said it sooner."

Her son, choked by her words, only buried his nose into her neck fur and shut his eyes tight.

Wait, what am I doing? Moonpaw remembered suddenly that she should be helping Whitepool, not eavesdropping on a private conversation. She tried to set her mind on her work, though the touching moment between Bumblestar and his strict mother lingered in the back of her mind. With a hushed reverence, she padded into the den.

She opened her mouth to call out to the medicine cat once more, but a thought struck her. *She hasn't eaten yet, so I bet she'd really appreciate some food.*

She slipped out of the den, wincing at the cold that hit her muzzle, and padded through the gap in the snow barrier, heading in the direction of the fresh-kill pile. The moment her eyes met it, she

realised why no prey had been brought to the den, not why she'd been sent to fetch any; it was almost empty. Two scrawny mice and a robin were left, all much smaller that Moonpaw imagined they should be. *No wonder every cat is getting sick,* she realised, *if there's no food to keep them going!*

Nevertheless, she picked up the robin; that, at least, appeared to have something more than bones inside of it. She turned back to head through the snow again, but stopped in her tracks as a patrol padded back in. *Which patrol is it?* She hoped it was a hunting patrol; the Clan would need it.

But her curiosity turned into horror as Ivymist and Tawnywing struggled past the camp entrance, carrying an unconscious Palepaw on their shoulders.

Chapter 44

Impatient winds hurried through the den and raked over Palepaw's pelt, rousing her from a cloudy dream.

She blinked open her eyes, trying to ignore the weight that seemed to drag her down, though failing pitifully as she attempted to heave herself into a sitting position. The light that shone in her face made her wince, recoiling from the sunny patch that her head had been in previously.

Then, it occurred to her that it was late in the morning. *That's funny,* she mused, too groggy to muster any real humour. *I'm usually dragged out of my nest by Sorrelspots at the crack of dawn*.

Her mind wandered to the events of the previous night and she felt a warmth flutter inside of her. *The gathering!* Though it hadn't been her first, the sight of the other Clans had filled her with an adrenaline and anticipation that she still couldn't truly comprehend. She'd been able to spend the night with her friends, and hadn't seen Rippleclaw's irritating face anywhere.

Come to think of it, I didn't see Moonpaw, either, she realised, turning to where her sister's nest was, only to find it empty. *I wonder where she went.*

In the end, she drew it down to her sister's nerves. *I know how shy she can get.*

With great effort, she managed to stand, though the stiffness in her joints made it hard to hold herself there.

Ignoring her protesting limbs, she forced her way out of the den, biting back the urge to yelp as the cold snapped around her the instant she left the warmth of her den.

The sun blinded her for more than a moment. She squinted around at the clearing, waiting for the scrutiny of the sun to die down

before gingerly stepping in the crisp surface of the hardened snow. She noticed that only one set of pawsteps left her den, while the rest of the camp had multiple sets. *Moonpaw,* she noted hazily. *Her paws are so small compared to how large her thick fur makes her seem. It's cute.*

The snow outside the warriors' den had been churned into a frozen slush, while the outside of the elders' den lay eerily untouched. *I wonder if Redfeather has eaten lately.* The thought flitted past her mind, before she briefly recalled the order from Shrewfoot last night to bring prey to the elder that night after she returned from the gathering.

She stiffly padded through the snow, placing her paws into the holes that Moonpaw had left. Though it took longer than simply ploughing through, it meant that less snow clung to her, and she much preferred that.

She peered around, looking for her mentor, blinking to clear the cloudiness in her eyes. When she spotted her, sat with Kestreltail on a rock, waving a tail in front of each eye in turn, she quickly stopped following Moonpaw's steps to the medicine den and hopped into the slush that the warriors had left, squelching over to the two she-cats.

Before she even spoke, Sorrelspots spoke, making her jump. "Whitepool asked me to spend the day with Kestreltail, helping her around and checking her eyesight."

What happened to her eye? Then Palepaw recalled the battle in ShadowClan's camp, and how ragged it had left them all - Kestreltail especially. *I didn't know it had been that bad, though.*

Ignoring the stab of guilt that came with the realisation that she'd completely ignored the she-cat after they'd arrived back at camp after the battle, she gazed around her. Before she could even ask, Sorrelspots spoke again. "You're going on a patrol with Tawnywing, Ivymist and Oakfur soon, actually. If you hadn't woken up now, I would have come to get you."

She nodded to her mentor, clenching her teeth as her neck tensed

painfully, then turned to where her patrol stood, already gathered. When Palepaw began shuffling in their direction, Ivymist noticed her, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Oakfur wanted to start without you!" She called as a greeting. "But you're here now, so he can't complain any more."

With a huff, the dark brown tom flicked his tail. "Let's get going, shall we? Now that we're finally together," he added with a pointed glance towards Palepaw which she chose to ignore.

"Hold on," Tawnywing retorted, nudging him out of the way. "I'm leading this patrol, in case you'd forgotten. We'll leave only when we're all ready." She turned to Palepaw, eyes rounding with sympathy. "Are you alright? I heard it was very cold last night at the gathering; some cats got sick."

She nodded once, not trusting her own voice - she felt like she'd swallowed a pinecone - and Tawnywing took that as confirmation, turning back around and leading the patrol out of camp.

As soon as they began moving, Palepaw felt her legs begin to tense up, much like her neck had when she'd nodded to Sorrelspots, making her feel as if she was dragging the entire forest with her. She hung at the back with Ivymist, keeping her gaze on the slush-covered dead leaves beneath her.

"Are you okay? You usually talk, but today you're quiet." She jumped at the sudden voice, almost slipping over. It had been Ivymist, her eyes rounded with sympathy. "Are you tired from the gathering?"

"I- um-" she winced at the hoarseness in her words, clearing her throat before replying properly. "I'm fine." She mumbled it, not trusting her voice.

This only seemed to worry her friend more, but after a long, tired silence, she finally shook her head. "If you say so." Her voice held a hurt tone that made Palepaw feel even worse. *I usually tell her what's going on,* she reflected, shuffling her paws awkwardly as she walked, then stopping because it required more energy. She trudged along

behind the patrol, just trying to keep her eyes open.

It must be the gathering that made me so sluggish, she reasoned with herself. But part of her wouldn't believe it. *I wasn't like that last time, though.*

Trying to take her mind off of it, she turned into Tawnywing and Oakfur's - rather one-sided - conversation.

"Your little kits are all grown up now," she teased, gifting him a gentle nudge. Palepaw waited for the seemingly grumpy tom to snap back at the unnecessary friendliness in her voice, but he merely scoffed.

"Maybe Rosekit is, but Thornkit is so weak in comparison." The tom suddenly became a lot more invested in the subject. "My other kits could hold their ground in a play-fight, but he can hardly stand one blow from his sister."

A rush of sympathy stabbed at her heart. *If Sunflame ever spoke badly of Moonpaw to anyone, I would be furious.* But when she thought of the black kit, she could only recall his eyes, silver-grey and unnerving.

She felt her own eyes begin to close at the memory, and found herself unable to keep them open this time.

The last thing she remembered was Ivymist screeching her name before she crashed to the ground.

~

Merry Christmas, everyone! (Or, if you don't celebrate Christmas... happy holidays!) I hope you all have lovely days.

I thought for a while about what to do for you guys for Christmas; should I just release this chapter? Should I do something else?

In the end, I just thought I'd mention a few things.

First of all, I have a number of side books to be written after

Falling Moon is finished, including Bumblestar's, perhaps even a re-release of Ivyfrost's (but with a reinvented plot), and some more that I can't even mention yet because of spoilers. I believe that there is a total of four books that I will definitely write eventually.

Second of all, I've also been working on another book, one that involves hearing things about cats who you may never hear from otherwise, like how Echopaw's mind sounds if she already blurts out most of her thoughts, or how Screech became a renowned murderer. I was considering releasing that now, actually, but I decided that I would rather wait, because half of the questions that would be asked would be declined because they would probably spoil Falling Moon. *However, if you come up with some interesting, non-spoiler ideas, I may consider publishing them, anyway.*

Anyway, I know this isn't much to offer, but I hope you'll enjoy looking forward to some of these future projects.

Chapter 45

The hazy memory of a patrol was all that Palepaw remembered as she began to rouse.

It was dark - she could tell that much - but not quite night. As she tried to open her eyes, she only ended up managing a weak squint, the heaviness on her eyelids like boulders.

Where am I? She wondered, taking in her surroundings as best she could with just cracks for eyes. However, one inhale was all it took to identify her location; she was instantly overwhelmed by the reek of herbs.

She attempted to move, but found herself unable to. She then remembered what she'd been doing beforehand. *Why am I in the medicine den?* She was supposed to be on patrol! She tried once again to heave herself to her paws, but was once again rendered useless.

A stirring next to her told her that she wasn't only weighed down by her own weakness. Beside her, a head raised, blinking two sleepy yellow eyes.

"Oh, hi, Palepaw," it murmured. "What are you doing in my nest?"

The face of Moonpaw stared for a few more moments as Palepaw tried to speak, then squinted at her. "This isn't my nest. Is it yours?"

It took her a few more moments to figure out what was going on. The white she-cat leapt to her paws, knocking back her sister's head as she did so. "You're awake!"

Ignoring the sharp pain in her head, she made to reply to her sister, though could only manage a hoarse squeak. What's wrong with me? *Maybe I really did swallow a pinecone!* Instinctively, she blamed it on Thistlefrost.

"You have whitecough," her sister explained, the relief in her voice unnerving. *Was I asleep for long? And how did I get whitecough?* "You fainted on your patrol, and Ivymist and Tawnywing carried you back." She paused for a moment, glancing around, as if checking for any other cats. "According to Ivymist, Oakfur jumped like a startled squirrel when you fainted, and wouldn't go anywhere near you after that!"

The amusement in her voice was almost contagious, though Palepaw wasn't sure if it was that funny. "My head hurts," she whispered, feeling a sense of achievement for being able to make a noise.

Her sister's eyes grew round with worry. "Whitepool said that if you'd hurt your head, your recovery might take longer. Did you land on it?"

It was you, mouse-brain! She hissed playfully in her mind, shaking her head feebly. A shiver ran through her body as a draft entered the medicine den, though she hardly felt it over the blazing fire that raged beneath her pelt.

Moonpaw let out a large breath, then sat down. "Whitepool said that I should look after you until you recover." Her bright eyes suddenly lit up. "We're going to have so much fun!"

Palepaw tilted her head teasingly. "Fun?" She croaked. "I'm not sure being sick is fun."

Her sister froze, then glanced at her paws nervously. "I- I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I didn't mean for it to come out like that. You're supposed to be resting, as well, and that's priority."

Shocked by her remorseful apology, Palepaw fervently shook her head - then lay it back on the ground as she grew dizzy and her head began to throb. "I was joking!" She reassured her sister, wincing as her voice cracked midway and she ended up squeaking.

Moonpaw shuffled her paws awkwardly. Palepaw could sense the apology on her tongue, but was too exhausted to reply. "Oh," her sister murmured. "You're probably tired. Sorry for keeping you up.

You need to rest." She got to her paws, then hesitated. "The apprentices' den is going to be empty tonight..."

Quickly catching onto what her sister wanted, she twitched the tip of her tail as if beckoning her back over. "I think I'm a bit cold," she mumbled. "You could always keep me warm."

Moonpaw eagerly stepped back into the nest, curling around her sister, draping her fluffy tail over Palepaw's flank. "Good night, Palepaw," she mumbled as she settled her head on her paws. "And thank you." She only just caught the last part; it was barely more than a whisper, and her senses felt as if they had halved in quality.

Palepaw copied her sister, shifting into a more comfortable position, before finding herself very quickly slipping into sleep.

~

Sorry this is shorter than usual. I actually meant to add it onto the end of the last chapter, but I wanted to release the chapter on Christmas, and I hadn't written it by then. When I come around to editing this book, I'll sort it out.

Anyway, happy (late) new years! I hope this year is kind to you.

How are you finding this book so far? Has anything made you laugh, or saddened you, or even confused you? I'd love to know!

Chapter 46

"Moonpaw?"

Jolting awake, Moonpaw swiveled around to where the voice had come from, taking her gaze off of her sleeping sister's form.

"You're not still awake, are you?" She watched as Whitepool climbed out of her nest, making her way quietly over to the apprentice.

She had been drifting off halfway through Palepaw's second night in the medicine den. Her sister's condition hadn't improved over the first day, and she couldn't help worrying fiercely for her. She was determined to sit with her throughout the night, to make sure nothing bad happened. *It really is as everyone says,* she mused. *Since becoming a medicine cat, the whole Clan have become my kits, even my own sister.*

When Moonpaw didn't respond, Whitepool sat down beside her, wrapping her tail around the cat. Moonpaw noticed that she now sat almost as tall as the medicine cat. *Whitepool and Silverleaf are small,* she recalled. *Even with Amberblaze's build, I'm already their size.* She wondered wistfully if she'd lost the awkwardness that seemed to cling to her movements wherever she went. *I can sort herbs quickly, but when it comes to actually moving...*

"Staring at her won't help her condition," Whitepool murmured. "Believe me, I know."

What does she mean? Moonpaw turned to ask her, but the medicine cat had a faraway look in her eyes. *I probably shouldn't intrude anyway,* she realised, a sliver of guilt worming itself through her. *If we're talking about mourning, it's likely a painful subject.*

However, the she-cat's message had gotten through to her - her brain, at least, for her heart still longed to watch her sleeping sister, to be there in case anything happened - and she reluctantly settled

herself back into her nest.

I can't help it, she repeated in her mind, *so I shouldn't worry.*

She found sleep surprisingly quickly, awakening into a forest of glimmering oak.

It took Moonpaw a heartbeat to realise that she was actually in StarClan, and not just in one of her wistful dreams full of the beautiful hunting grounds.

She drank up the sight of the place as if it were cool water in greenleaf, never seeming to get enough of it. *There's something about StarClan that just makes you want to beg for more.*

Old habits calling to her, she peered up at the sky as she did most nights, finding a path of stars so clear that she almost stumbled back in awe. *Did I see this the first time I came here, with Heathermist and Bluestar?* She wondered. She couldn't remember seeing such a beautiful sight. She could almost feel the radiant gazes of her ancestors peering down at her with every blink of the sparkling stars.

As she looked on, the path began to align itself, becoming one smooth, sweeping trail. It led over the rise of two gentle slopes, where it seemed to graze the peaks, before trickling out of sight.

An aching sensation tugged at Moonpaw's chest, like the path was calling out to her. She briefly searched her mind for a reason to ignore the pull, found none, and began padding towards the slopes.

As she grew closer, the oak forest she had awoken in seemed to thin, exposing a large clearing. Though it seemed empty at first, the longer Moonpaw moved on, the more glittering pelts became evident.

"Moonpaw!" One of the cats called out to her. It was a pale ginger she-cat with a brown paw. She looked familiar, however, like a youthful version of...

"Gingerheart!" She exclaimed, padding over. A warmth spread in her heart as she recalled how frail the she-cat had been in life, such

a contrast to the healthy warrior in front of her.

Peering at her curiously from where Gingerheart had left them were two little kits, a little ginger tabby tom and a grey she-kit.

"Those were Bumblestar and Goldensun's littermates, Flamekit and Cloudkit," the former elder explained. "I'm so happy to see them again." The ginger she-cat paused, turning around. "You have somewhere to be, but first, you must meet someone."

She beckoned for the apprentice to follow with her tail, then padded over to a rustling clump of grass.

"Thistlekit?" The older she-cat's tone was gentle. "Moonpaw has come to see you."

Instantly, a striped grey head poked up, emerald eyes taking her in in awe. "*You're* Moonpaw? Wow!"

What have I done that's so great? She wondered, nervously shuffling her paws. "Uh... Hello?"

"You saved my kit," came a warm murmur from beside her. She jumped, turning her head around quickly to find the grateful gaze of Thistleheart on her pelt. "And because your eyes are open to more than most cats, you could save my mate, as well."

Guilt rippled along her pelt. *I couldn't save his other kits, though.* "Thistleheart, I-"

"Don't worry about it," he purred, scooping up little Thistlekit with a paw and placing him on his back, where two little ginger ears and round blue eyes watched her cautiously.

Thistleheart nodded to the hill she'd been heading to. "You have to keep going, Moonpaw," he began, pausing so he wasn't drowned out by Thistlekit's protests, "but I just wanted to thank you for giving life to Mistykit."

What does he mean? Of course I was going to help his kit; I would have been breaking the code - and being a terrible cat - if I didn't! She said her goodbyes, the warmth in the StarClan cats' eyes giving her a

renewed determination.

As she padded away, she saw other families playing and talking, all radiating the relaxed atmosphere. *It would be nice if every cat could share this peaceful feeling,* she thought to herself. The flood of calm washing over her was like nothing she'd ever experienced. The first time she'd seen StarClan at the moonpool, it had been after visiting the Dark Forest, and she'd been too shaken up to truly notice how breathtaking the place was.

Upon reaching the top of the hill, she paused, taking another moment to observe. Stars glistened in every living thing below, both cat and plant, and in a large pool of water at the bottom of the slope that rippled and gleamed and shone.

She followed her trail of starlight to the pool, her heart pounding with every whispering breeze that pulled at it. She suddenly felt very out of place, as if she were trespassing.

However, curiosity got the better of her, and she peered into its dark blue depths.

She saw just the bottom of the pool, full of grit and silver pebbles. *Oh.* She felt somewhat disappointed. She had expected to find more than a pond of water at the end of the trail. She glanced up at the sky to make sure that the trail didn't continue, and was once again silenced by its beauty.

A swirl of stars glittered around her, gazing upon her with the wisdom of a thousand elders. She suddenly felt very small beneath the beautiful array of light.

This is the place. It has to be.

After a moment's hesitation, she touched her paw to the pool, and then stood back in awe as the silver sheen began to change with every ripple.

As the movement stilled, she found herself watching a scene. A large lake, surrounded by forests and hills and rivers, bathed in moonlight.

That's the lake, she realised, and a warm pull tugged at her heart. *Our lake.* She touched the pool once again, hoping to see her home in ThunderClan.

However, it wasn't the familiar, bramble-lined home that she'd grown up in. It was a needle-coated dip in the earth of a pine forest. The scene was empty, except for a white cat, whose eyes glittered in the moonlight as Moonpaw stared, entranced.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you."

The voice was so close that she almost fell into the pool. She whipped around, and found herself face to face with a dark ginger tom, his pine-green eyes dark. "The longer you stare, the longer you stay. That may not be a problem for the timeless dead, but for you, the consequences would be terrible."

Moonpaw found herself shivering. Though the tom was clearly from StarClan - the aura of light that almost radiated from him said so - something about him unnerved her. He seemed very powerful. Nervously, she turned to face the pool again, watching as the white cat in the pine forest was joined briefly by a black cat, before the white cat dismissed them.

"So," he continued, "You met Rippleclaw. He's quite something, isn't he?"

Moonpaw spun around to face him again, finding her gaze hazy from the sudden shift in focus. After blinking quickly, she padded forward - then paused. *What if some StarClan cats are bad?*

The uncertainty in her gaze must have shone through, for his tone softened. "You're safe in StarClan, Moonpaw. And even if I wanted to harm you in any way..."

He turned his head to the hill, where a slim silhouette stood. Moonpaw could make out warm amber eyes and pale fur. "Your little guardian watches you and your family all the time, you know. She doesn't do much else."

Then, his gaze narrowed. "It's unusual for the dead to have such

strong connections to life, but she won't stop longing for the life she never had, to be the cat she never got to be."

It's Heathermist, she realised, recalling the previous visit, where she had walked with her father's sister and learned of a prophecy. It seemed like so long ago.

Ignoring the sudden longing to talk to her, Moonpaw turned to the ginger tom. "Who are you? And why am I here?"

The tom dipped his head. "Forgive me for not telling you earlier. I am Flamestar, the previous leader of ShadowClan, before Flashstar. Before your father's father killed me."

She didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. There are more important things to discuss. Things that only a select few cats may ever hear of."

He turned to the pool after that, waving his tail over it. "This is the ShadowClan camp - and that is Flashstar." He pointed to the white cat with the tip of his tail.

Moonpaw hesitated, remembering the leader's warning, before gazing into the pool again. The ShadowClan camp was a peaceful place, though it looked cold. Despite the colour difference in the white cat and his surroundings, he seemed to fit into the atmosphere perfectly.

"You are the only one who can save ShadowClan from the oncoming darkness."

She shivered from the chill in his voice, then reluctantly turned to him, having to peel her eyes away from the scene in the water. "How am I supposed to do that?" Her voice shook.

"The sun and moon have always worked together to create night and day. This has happened for as long as we know, and will continue to happen for as long as we can predict." His voice changed as he spoke, morphing and adapting a much more otherworldly tone. *Is this just Flamestar's way of speaking, or do all StarClan cats sound like this when relaying something important?*

"You, Moonpaw, are the moon." The mention of her name made her heart falter for a moment. "You are strong, stronger than we could ever have predicted, but even the brightest of moons need a sun to light up the world when they can't."

The image of her father plagued her mind. *Perhaps he is the sun in this prophecy?*

"You must find your sun, and together unite the darkness. Otherwise, it won't be just ShadowClan who falls; one by one, little by little, every Clan will suffer from one's loss. Every Clan will fall to the terror of a day with no sun, and a night with no moon." It was as if a darkness had seized the landscape for a moment; their surroundings seemed to dim, the image in the pool winking out of view.

Upon realising that the tom was now waiting for her to speak, she shuffled her paws, desperately trying to piece together all the information. *No matter what I think, StarClan seems adamant that I am this "moon" in their prophecy.* But who was the "sun"?

She could only assume it was Sunflame, but she couldn't imagine such an easy prophecy to be given to her. *In the stories, it took the medicine cats moons - days at the least - to figure prophecies out. Why would it be different now?*

As she was worrying about the ordeal, a bright flash ripped her sight away from her, and she felt herself being carried away by some great force, a bit like the wind, only much stronger.

As soon as she could, she opened her eyes, and was astonished to find herself looking over the lake and the Clans surrounding it. It was like she was still peering into the StarClan pool - but this time, she was actually there.

But it wasn't the beautiful view, drowned in light and snow, that had left her speechless.

It was the sky, a clear blue, adorned not only by a sun but also by a shimmering moon.

As soon as the image was burned into her mind, she woke up.

Chapter 47

Palepaw woke quickly that dawn, much to her disappointment.

It had been two days since she'd been taken into the medicine cat den, and she was so bored, having nothing to do all day but lie in a nest and recover. Of course, she felt tired and feverish, but her health had improved drastically since her first night in the den.

It's all thanks to the catmint, she thought with a smug flick of her tail, *of which we have plenty of still, despite Thistlefrost's complaints on that patrol.*

However, after peering around the den, her mood quickly soured. While her condition had improved within those two days, Pebblesplash's had worsened. She rarely woke, even more rarely spoke, and often got visits from her mate that resulted in the she-cat not recognising him.

Gaze flitting to another nest, she lifted herself into a sitting position, before setting out on the task of grooming her pelt. However, it occupied her for hardly a minute, and she soon found herself with nothing to do once more.

She wondered if Whitepool would let her out. *Probably not, but it's worth a try,* she mused to herself, opening her mouth to call the medicine cat over. However, she stopped when she noticed the white she-cat bent over Silverleaf as usual, her white tail swishing behind her.

Deciding not to bother the she-cat, she turned to the entrance of the den. She watched tiny flakes of white drifting down. *I wonder if anyone's tried to count snowflakes,* she mused, longing to play outside.

In her subconscious state, she almost didn't notice her sister padding in. Relief ached in her paws as Moonpaw made her way over. *Finally, someone to talk to!* "Hey, Moonpaw! Took you long

enough!"

Her sister's whiskers twitched in amusement as she made her way over to Palepaw. Her fur freshly groomed, she looked more than ready to start the day, perhaps even a little eager. *She's grown up so much,* she found herself thinking as she watched the approaching she-cat.

While her sister's fur was still soft and fluffy, rather than making her look like a lump of snow, she looked quite elegant. She'd grown well in the past moon, her small paws making their way carefully across the den and giving a dainty impression.

Palepaw glanced at her own paws, wondering if she had grown too.

"How are you?" She glanced up to find Moonpaw now standing in front of her, eyes shining with worry. "Are you okay? You're awake, which is probably good, but that could be because you're in pain, or you're unwell, or - why are you smiling at me?"

Palepaw didn't realise that she'd been grinning. "Oh, sorry," she replied quickly. "I was just thinking about how funny you are. In a good way, though!" She added quickly as her sister's face fell.

Palepaw decided to change the subject. "Can I leave yet? I'm feeling fine. We could go out and explore the snow together!"

Moonpaw giggled softly. "Whitepool assumed that would be your first question. I've already been told that no matter how many times you ask me, I have to say no."

She huffed. "I should've known." *Well, at least she's happy again.* "What are you here to see me for, then? Other than the fact that I'm your sister and amazing company, of course."

"Oh. Right. That." Moonpaw suddenly looked very sheepish - and not just because of her fluffy white pelt. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" She asked, but Moonpaw never got a chance to elaborate as a blur of gold flashed through the den.

"Palepaw! What happened to you? Are you okay? I was so worried!"

Sunflame's nervous voice half-deafened her as he padded quickly around her, checking for injuries that definitely didn't exist.

Moonpaw hushed him, glancing nervously toward the other nests in the den. Palepaw tried to follow her gaze but found a wall of golden fur blocking her way.

"I'm fine," she huffed, sinking back into her nest. "I'd be even better if you moved back a bit."

Sunflame stepped back, and Palepaw soon felt bad for the annoyed tone she'd put on. His eyes were dark with worry, his fur unkept. He'd clearly been up that night, and she could only assume that it was out of worry for his sick daughter.

Sunflame sat beside Palepaw and began to groom her pale pelt, the rhythmic strokes of his tongue soothing whatever remained of her fever.

In fact, she felt so relaxed just a few moments into it that she didn't notice another cat entering the den, heavily assisted by another, until they passed right by her.

She flattened her ears, surprised, when a foul scent drifted over to her. She spun around quickly to see Honeywhisker helping Spottedrose climb into a nest that Moonpaw was hurriedly putting together. Honeywhisker carried a tiny kit in her jaws, which she gently placed by Spottedrose once the queen had settled.

Reluctantly, Palepaw pushed her father away and turned to see what Whitepool thought of having more sick cats. However, to her surprise, it was as though the medicine cat hadn't even noticed. She fumbled about with herbs, murmuring under her breath as her eyes darted about nervously. Never had she looked more like Moonpaw.

Speaking of her sister, Palepaw returned her gaze and thoughts to the apprentice tending to Spottedrose. Moonpaw stuttered and glanced over to Whitepool for approval she would never get more than once, but she didn't second-guess, which Palepaw found surprising. Pride for her sister swelled in her chest.

"I suppose I'll leave you here then," Sunflame mumbled, startling Palepaw. She'd completely forgotten that he was there. "Don't get yourself hurt, and if you need anything, let someone know, okay?"

Forcing a grin, she gave her father a weak playful shove. "I'll be fine! Go be all lovey-dovey with Amberblaze or something."

Sunflame left her alone after that, but not before flicking her over the ears with his tail.

Palepaw sunk down in her nest with a huff. Why couldn't she go out, too? There were probably warriors feeling twice as bad as her, and new patients would likely need the space. It made perfect sense for her to leave.

Yet she couldn't deny the weariness in her bones, the tiredness in her eyes. It was as if her whole body were still asleep, pulling her down like a great weight. She had fainted just two days ago, and though she had made what could be called a miraculous recovery, she couldn't deny that she was still sick.

With a huff of defeat, she slumped in her nest, resting her head on her paws as she watched the two white medicine cats work. She couldn't go out today, but nothing would stop her from getting out eventually. When she finally got the chance to return to her apprentice duties, she would do her best to prove that she was the best apprentice there had ever been.